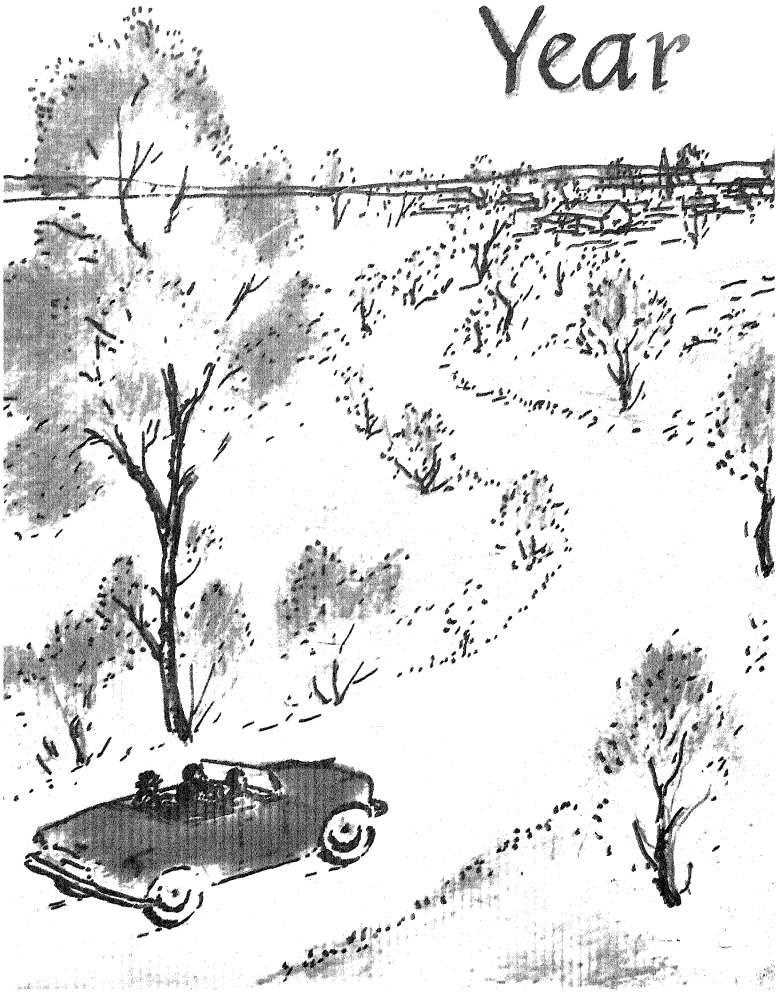
NORMA WOOD JAMES

# Bittersweet Year



# BITTERSWEET YEAR

## BY NORMA WOOD JAMES

*Decorations by Johannes Troyer*

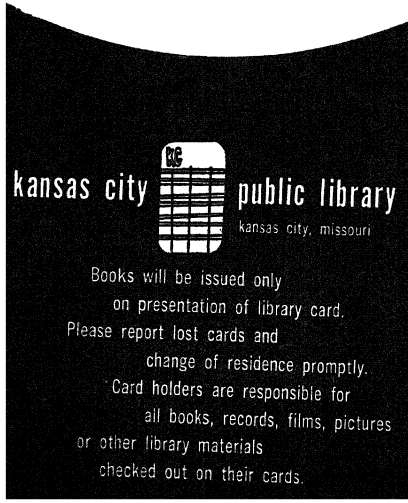
Things look black for Kathy when Father's business reverses make it necessary for the family to move to a small town upstate. The glamorous Bob Lansford will not be there, nor will Lucy, her best friend and confidante. She and Lucy have just made the hurdle over college boards and plan to be college roommates next year. Will [illegible] Father's small [illegible] business provide for this?

[illegible] Kathy does her best to help get the business started. When embittered Great Aunt Emily refuses the use of a road through her property—the only one to the railroad station—Kathy finds a way to deliver the manufactured goods.

[illegible] small town is not so dull after all. There are many tangled skeins to be unravelled. Why the strained relationship between the librarian and the doctor?

(Continued on back flap)

James, Norma Wood 62-23356
Bittersweet year. Long-
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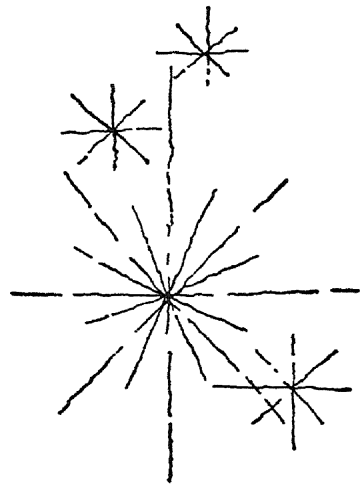


# BITTERSWEET YEAR

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by

**Norma Wood James**



LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO
1961

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO., INC.
119 WEST 40TH STREET, NEW YORK 18

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO., LTD.
48 GROSVENOR STREET, LONDON W 1

LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO.
137 BOND STREET, TORONTO 2

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PUBLISHED SIMULTANEOUSLY IN THE DOMINION OF CANADA BY LONGMANS, GREEN AND CO., TORONTO

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS CATALOG CARD NUMBER 61-13102

Printed in the United States of America

*For my daughter*
Beverly

OTHER BOOKS BY MRS. JAMES

*Dawn at Lexington*
*Young Doctor of New Amsterdam*

# 1

IT WAS EARLY SATURDAY MORNING. CLOUDS HID THE SUN AND the damp night air of March still lingered in the bedroom. Kathy finished dressing, too preoccupied to notice.

As though in a trance she pushed up the sleeves of her pale-blue sweater and tugged her skirt belt tighter. Then she couldn't remember whether or not she had brushed her teeth. Back down the hall she rushed. Yes, the brush was wet, and the reflection in the medicine-chest mirror was reassuring. Her short blonde hair was smooth. Coral lipstick curved her lips. A dusting of powder covered the freckles on her saucy nose.

At her mother's third reminder, she called back, "Be right down, Mums," and leaned closer to the mirror for a final inspection. Considering she had slept hardly at all, she didn't look as awful as she should, Kathy decided.

Last night she had made it a point to be in bed, lights out, by ten o'clock. Rhythmically then, like the white organdy curtains at her windows billowing and slacking in the damp breeze, the words "college board exams" had seemed to loom and then fade into the darkness only to loom again, larger and more formidable.

Stretching her slim legs, wriggling down until her toes touched the footboard, Kathy had tried to relax every last muscle. But sleep would not come and she fretted. Tomorrow she simply must be rested and ready for those exams. Four hours of fast thinking—all the kids say it's tough, even the smartest—and I've only an eighty-seven average. Anxiously her thoughts had raced on until, with abrupt determination, she curled up on her side, blankets and all. A mound of fluffy pink, with only one wavy lock of honey-colored hair spread on the pillow, she had whispered fiercely to herself:

"You don't have to pass the old entrance exams, Kathy Parker! Because your brother and sister graduated from college doesn't mean you have to do the same."

In her heart she knew she had to pass. If Bob Lansford entered Upstate, if Lucy and the rest of the crowd went away to school and left her behind, she—why, she'd just die. There simply had to be a letter of acceptance from the university in the Parker mailbox this coming June. Nevertheless, she had insisted again that it wasn't so terribly important, and the freedom was comforting. Soon she had fallen asleep.

Now, downstairs at the breakfast table, the momentousness of this particular Saturday morning overwhelmed her once more and, after a glance at the calendar, she groaned, "The Ides of March. That's bad luck. I'll never make it. This is the end!"

"No, March 15 is nearly the beginning of spring, a wonderfully promising day, I always say," her mother insisted.

"Not for me." Kathy slid into the place opposite her father. The headline on the newspaper he held made no sense. "I can't read!" she cried. "I can't think, not even whether I want my egg boiled or scrambled. Oh, how can I ever take those tests?"

Her mother laughed, cracked an egg into a yellow bowl and whipped in milk with a fork. "I'll decide that for you, kitten."

"Please! Don't call me kitten. I'm seventeen and one-sixth years old!"

"Well, you figured that out fast enough. I don't believe your math is as bad as you say. And anyway, you've applied for journalism, so vocabulary and reading will count more. Your column in the school paper will help too." Her mother added softly, "Now, don't worry. You've studied the sample tests ever since Christmas."

Kathy groaned again. "It was time wasted. Oh, Mums, I can't remember a thing. I'm a great big zero!"

"Nonsense," Mrs. Parker answered. "Your brother Steve worried before a test. Jane too. They always passed. All my children are bright," she added firmly, as though that settled it. "Kathy will do well this morning, won't she, Matthew?"

Mr. Parker looked up from his newspaper. "Yes, certainly. I'm sure of it," he said rather absent-mindedly. "After I drop Kathy off at school I think I'll drive over to the north shore."

"It's not a good day for horseback riding, Dad. Too raw." Kathy forced herself to make conversation, to think of some-

thing besides the coming ordeal. "But your friends at the club will be glad to see you. And give your horse's velvet nose an extra pat for me," she added gaily.

Her father cleared his throat and resettled his glasses before answering. "I'm going to the plant, Kathy. There's some paper work I have to finish."

Mother interrupted, chattering about the scrambled egg not being scorched, she hoped. But Dad folded his paper and added with deliberate calm: "I sold my horse and resigned from the Hunt Club last month."

"You did?" Kathy showed her amazement.

Riding was her father's only relaxation, and he had belonged to the Hunt Club ever since she could remember. At one time she had done a lot of riding too. Lately though, studies, school games, and dances left no hours to spare. Moreover, Lucy, her best friend, was afraid of horses. "Why, Dad?" asked Kathy, leaning toward him.

Mrs. Parker hurriedly broke in. "It's temporary. It's only because Dad has been too busy. Isn't that so, Matt?" Without waiting for an answer she went on, "Jane will be over this morning, so I won't be lonesome." In her quietest voice she added, "Don't work over those accounts too late, dear."

In spite of her single-mindedness this morning, Kathy caught the look of concern that passed between her parents. She had noticed it more than once recently. Business problems, she supposed. Well, Dad would solve them. He always had. Anyway, they were rich. Not millionaires, of course, but they had this big brick house in Floral City,

Long Island, two cars, and a camp in Maine. Never had she had to worry about enough clothes or anything else. Neither had her brother and sister when they were home. Now with Steve and Jane both married and away, the Parkers must have more money than ever, reasoned Kathy, and immediately went back to worrying over the coming exams.

Ever since fifth grade she had wanted to go to college, and after her sister's graduation from Upstate University two years ago, those hilltop buildings and rolling lawns had been woven into her dreams. Neither she nor Lucy, her very best friend, had applied to any other school.

Aside from love, and the intriguing questions it raised—what is it, when, why, and how do you know if you're really in love for sure—she and Lucy had talked of little else. It was Upstate all the way. Then too Bob Lansford hoped to go there. Not that *that* would change things. Only sometimes did Kathy admit how much she hoped it would. Now, even though her father and Bob's were business partners, Bob only knew she existed when he forgot his English textbook or felt talkative and she happened to be near by. How silly she had been to think he might ask her to the prom, how lucky to have accepted another boy's invitation! It wouldn't be too exciting going with this other boy. He didn't talk about much except his rock collection, and he hated dancing. He was only going because every senior class aimed for 100 per cent attendance.

The roar of the motor in the garage and her mother's lavender-scented, good-luck kiss brought Kathy up short.

Here she was, wasting thoughts on the prom. That was two months away, while the crucial test was almost now.

Seated next to Dad as he drove through the empty Saturday streets toward school, Kathy thought his profile looked unusually stern. Was it nervousness for her, or something else? Something very serious about business after all? She ventured an optimistic comment.

"Bob Lansford says his father and you are sure to get another government contract."

Though he turned and smiled at her, his eyes remained clouded. He pushed several times at the nosepiece of his glasses before answering.

"You must have misunderstood. Mr. Lansford and I are no longer partners. He's gone over to a big corporation and left—That is I bought him out because"—Mr. Parker hesitated— "Never mind that now, kitten. Here we are." He gave her a gentle push. "Go in there and show them how smart you are. You've got that entrance slip with your number and signature on it? And the gummed stickers with that same number too? Good. Here are some peppermints. Mouth gets dry when you think too hard. Mine does, I know."

Kathy kissed his cheek. "No books, no papers, no pencils, we were told. I guess a roll of mints is all right."

After the long shiny black-and-white car pulled way she felt stranded until a familiar voice called, "Hi, Kath." Bob Lansford stood on the broad stone steps. "Scared?" he asked.

"A little," she admitted. As he looked at her, one dark

eyebrow cocked, she wished for the thousandth time that he were her escort for the May prom. Before she could say more, however, Bob's current girl hurried up the steps and possessively slipped her arm through his. With a casual, "Good luck," over her shoulder, Kathy entered the building alone.

Immediately after starting down the auditorium's right aisle Lucy's whispered call, more audible than a shout, stopped her. Lucy was waving vigorously from the other aisle.

"Kathy, Kathy," mimicked two grinning boys in gray military uniforms, and they began humming a little march as Kathy sidestepped past the center seats to reach her friend. "Kathy, please come sit by us. We're so-o-o nervous," they teased.

Like Lucy, she pretended not to hear. Primly she seated herself. Then the girls looked at one another and bubbled over into laughter. A sharp rap from the stage up front reminded them how serious an occasion this was. A few breathless latecomers ran in. The doors closed. All waited in rigid silence.

Came the order to line up, and from then on routine swept them along—signing in, being directed to different rooms, then to alternate rows of seats by one teacher while another teacher stood behind the front desk under a big clock and solemnly stacked the exams. When they were seated, she explained that the test consisted of four parts, with a set time allotted for each.

Kathy stared straight ahead. Lucy was two rows away

and, thank goodness, Bob had gone to another room. Nothing must distract her. One of the sealed exams was placed before her along with a special pencil. She affixed the numbered stickers. An impersonal machine would mark her paper. She had become only a number. That was some comfort. None of her favorite teachers need commiserate over her errors. And never would she know her score. That would go directly to Upstate University and they would decide on her eligibility. Then she would get a letter. Oh, it just had to begin, "We take pleasure in informing you—"

Now the teacher up front synchronized her watch with the clock overhead. Like the starter of a foot race she raised her hand, snapped it down. "Go!"

Fingers shaking, Kathy broke the seal. She read the first question. It made no sense. Neither did the second. Fighting panic, she read the third and answered it right away. Then back to the first and second. By some magic they were now as simple as one plus one, and she was off—filling in the little rectangles on her answer sheet beneath the letter corresponding to the right answer on the exam. In no time, it seemed, the call came, "Pencils down!"

After a few minutes they started again on the second part. There was a break before the third part—time to stretch—but Kathy remained seated, her slim ankles crossed under the desk until the next "Go!" Toward the end of each part the questions became more difficult. They had been told that no one finished them all, but Kathy kept on answering as many as she could.

In an unbelievably short time, the big clock insisted it was 12:30 P.M. The college board exams were over!

Kathy shuffled out behind Lucy, still dazed, but suddenly ravenous for food and conversation. While munching the forgotten peppermints the girls decided to compare answers. They found it impossible to recall one specific question. The absolute blank in memory was an experience shared by all, they soon discovered.

"Our brains must be exhausted," reasoned Lucy as they walked down the steps. "Let's forget it."

"Yes," agreed Kathy. "There's nothing we can do about it now anyway. Wouldn't it be terrible if our scores were too low for Upstate?"

"For me it would. I was eighteen last week," said Lucy, tossing her silky brown hair. "Remember, you're almost a year ahead. Why, you could afford the time to take some postgraduate courses and try again next year."

Kathy gasped. "What a thing to say, after we've been counting on being roommates, on joining the same sorority, on dating together—oh, just everything!"

"We still could, eventually. Don't frown so, Kathy. I'm trying to make you see a little logic. You've been fretting and stewing over these exams for weeks." Lucy pursed her lips. "After you reach eighteen it's natural to become more philosophical about these things. You'll see."

With an outraged squeal Kathy stopped short and faced her friend. "Lucy! Let me see your thumbs!" Quickly she pulled off Lucy's woolen mittens. "Ha!" she cried triumphantly. "So! You no longer worry now that you're so old

and wise! Then what happened to both those lovely long thumbnails?"

"I chewed them off," said Lucy defiantly, snatching back her mittens. She smiled then, sheepishly, and admitted, "You win."

A fresh burst of companionable laughter carried them all the way to the bus stop.

"I'd call Mums and ask her to come and pick us up, but she hasn't her car today," said Kathy. "It's in the garage being serviced, I guess."

"That's funny," commented Lucy, as she fished in her purse for fare. "I thought your mother sold her car to the people who live around the corner from us. That's what my mother said, but she's probably mistaken."

"Oh, she must be," agreed Kathy as they boarded the bus, but she remembered now her mother's exact answer: "I'm sorry I can't pick you up. I don't have my car." She hadn't actually said it was being fixed, Kathy realized.

"Mums would have no reason to sell her car," she insisted out loud. "It's only a year old." Still, she wondered. No, it couldn't be. It couldn't have anything to do with those "business problems." Mother couldn't possibly have sold it because they needed the money. How silly even to think of such a thing. Those exams had turned her into a chronic worrier.

"Are you sure you can't come home with me for lunch?" asked Kathy as the bus neared her corner.

"No. Thanks, but I have to set my hair and iron a blouse. Jim is coming over early tonight."

"Jim again? You're not going steady, are you?" Kathy had risen and signaled the driver, but now she turned. "Are you?"

"You'll miss your stop," said her friend with a tantalizing smile. Finally she relented. "Probably I'll decide tonight."

"Call me tomorrow after church and let me know," begged Kathy with a rush toward the opening door. "Promise?"

Satisfied by Lucy's smiling nod, Kathy hurried home. It was a long walk and usually pleasant. Today, however, a blustery March wind made her thankful to reach the warm kitchen. From the living room she could hear a spirited discussion between her mother and her sister Jane. So spirited, in fact, that they obviously had not heard her enter. They would have hurried out and swamped her with questions about the exam.

"It isn't fair," Jane's tempered outburst continued. "Why should Dad allow himself to be wiped out after working so hard all these years?"

Her mother sounded tired when she answered. "Don't you see, dear, if these men buy the company your father's employees will still have their jobs. Why, some of them have been with him since the beginning. Most of them are too old to get new positions easily. Dad feels responsible. Of course, the new buyers will fill the executive positions. They won't need Dad."

"That thief!" Jane cried.

"Jane!" Mother sounded shocked.

Kathy stood very still. What was this all about? Dad

hadn't mentioned a robbery. Wouldn't it have been in the papers?

"Very well," Jane was going on in her new efficient schoolteacher voice, "if you both insist on covering up for an unscrupulous person, couldn't Dad declare bankruptcy and dissolve? He'd salvage something." Jane paused. "No, I guess being Dad he couldn't do that."

"Of course not. Right is right." There was iron in Mums' voice now. "We pay our debts. The company's good name and the employees' jobs are main considerations." After a deep sigh she said softly: "Jane, the truth is that the company is already sold. The camp in Maine too. And this house. Yes, it's true. We're moving to Vickers Circle the end of June to—to start all over again."

Kathy pressed back against the door. Moving! To Vickers Circle! Mums had been a Vickers before her marriage and vaguely Kathy recalled mention of some run-down property she had inherited a few years back. The Circle was 150 miles north. Nearer to Upstate. Somehow that thought sped into her mind and she held it while trying to regain composure. Shaken as she was, Kathy knew she could not stand in the kitchen listening, eavesdropping. She turned to go out and reenter when she heard her own name.

"Kathy doesn't suspect?" her sister asked.

"No, no. We'd never forgive ourselves if our troubles spoiled Kathy's graduation. The college boards were given today, by the way. She should be home soon."

Kathy could hear her sister's fingers tapping on the marble-topped table as she hesitantly asked, "Things won't be

so bad that Kathy can't go to Upstate in September, will they?"

"Goodness, no! That is, I don't think so."

Tumbling crazily between belief and disbelief, Kathy's thoughts whirled. A sudden urgency possessed her. No one must know she had overheard. Somehow, everything would be as before if she pretended this had been a bad dream. That was irrational, almost superstitious, she knew. Still it enabled her to collect her wits, slam the back door and call out cheerily:

"Mums, I'm home. Has Jane come yet?"

# 2

"YOU DON'T SOUND AT ALL INTERESTED," PROTESTED LUCY.

Kathy gripped the phone tighter. "You're imagining that. I think it's terrific, wonderful, that you and Jim are going steady."

"You didn't sound excited at first," insisted her friend. "Yesterday, on the bus, you said you'd be so anxious to know."

Yesterday, thought Kathy. Everything's changed since then. She forced a little laugh. "I'm delirious. I can't wait to hear all about it."

"You're sure? Then I'll be over this afternoon."

Soon after her dark-eyed friend's arrival, Kathy's natural optimism returned. Drastic change in the Parker household seemed so unbelievable. Mums had, as usual, overladen the Sunday dinner table, and as usual, Dad had vowed to start dieting Monday and then gone off with some friends for a few holes of golf. So, while Lucy recounted for the second time each minute leading up to her new "engaged to be engaged" status, Kathy blocked off completely yesterday's overheard conversation.

Both girls sat on Kathy's bed, shoes off, feet curled under. Because the radio was on, the door was closed. Mums was understanding about most things. But she was a concert devotee, and "the noise this generation calls music" hurt her ears, she claimed. Each girl held an eyebrow pencil in one hand and a mirror in the other. Lucy experimented with a pensive slant, while Kathy darkened her fair brows into bold arches.

"I really should be working on the Senior Farewell for the school paper," said Kathy. "Or at least start searching the dark recesses of my mind for an inspiring title." She giggled. "But romance, even secondhand, is much more interesting. Suppose Lucy," she pondered aloud as she carefully penciled one eyelid, "you change. Or Jim changes."

"Going steady is not definite. Not like being engaged," her friend reminded her. "There'll be plenty of time for us to think it over. Before you marry you have to be very sure."

Simultaneously they dropped their mirrors, intent on this serious matter, until they looked into each other's eyes and saw the havoc each had accomplished. Shrieks of laughter followed, then a dash down the hall to the bathroom.

A moment after they finished creaming and washing their faces, Mums called up the stairs. "Telephone, Kathy. It's Bob Lansford."

Lucy squeezed Kathy's arm. "I'll bet he and his girl had another fight. He's calling for a date, wait and see. Oh, Kathy, everything is happening to us at once."

"Nothing of the sort," said Kathy as they clattered down

the stairs. "He's forgotten his English book again, that's all."

"Ssssh!" cautioned her mother, handing over the phone.

Bob seemed eager to talk about last week's basketball game, next week's test, and the weather. What had he really called for? He was having a hard time saying whatever it was. Finally she decided to help him. "I've finished my English homework. You may borrow my book if you like."

"Book? Oh, don't know as I blame you for thinking I called to borrow again, Kath. The fact is, I called about the prom. I'd like to take you. How about it?"

Kathy's breath caught. Her acceptance of another boy's invitation a week ago was swept from her mind as, "Yes, Bob, I'd love to," fairly sang from her lips.

"Lucy!" she cried, spinning toward her, after cradling the phone. "Bob is taking me to the prom!"

"But—" Lucy began, then added quickly, "All is fair in love and war, I guess." She joined Kathy's giddy dance.

Mrs. Parker broke in. "Isn't the other boy able to take you after all?"

Kathy clapped a hand to her mouth. "I forgot."

"You'll have to call him and explain," her mother went on.

"That's right," said Lucy, sounding relieved. "He'll understand. Besides, there's plenty of time for him to ask someone else."

Mrs. Parker shook her head. "No, Lucy. Kathy will have to call Bob Lansford and tell him that she had already promised to go to the Senior Prom with someone else."

"No. Oh, I couldn't!" cried Kathy.

"Now, kitten, you know you must," said her mother, gently cupping Kathy's small firm chin in her hand.

"Don't call me kitten!" Kathy pulled away. "You know how I've always liked Bob, how much I hoped he'd ask me to the prom. Why this is the biggest event of my life so far. I want it to be perfect!"

Her mother drew herself erect and frowned. All at once she, who had always been so eager to help fulfill every wish, seemed a stranger, a very remote stranger. It was fearful.

Kathy ran her fingers through her hair and began speaking slowly, calmly. "Mother, this isn't the same as mixing up ordinary party dates. If you like someone very much, are almost in love with him, or think you could be—oh, Mother, can't you understand?"

"The sooner the easier," said Mrs. Parker as though Kathy hadn't spoken. "I'll get the Lansford number for you." She picked up the telephone and dialed.

"Maybe your mother is right," whispered Lucy.

"Traitor!" Kathy's blue eyes sparked. "And take your thumb out of your mouth!"

"Perhaps I had better leave," said Lucy, reaching for her coat.

"Yes, please do," Kathy shot back, and when the front door closed with a final click an ache that had started somewhere deep inside rose to her throat without warning. She took the phone from her mother and found she could barely speak.

"What's the matter?" asked Bob impatiently.

"I can't go to the prom with you, because—" Kathy swallowed hard.

Bob cut in. "Because your mother won't let you?"

"Yes, in a way." Startled by his swift perception she found her voice again. "You see—" she began.

"Yes, I do see," Bob interrupted. "Your folks are mad at the whole Lansford family because my dad played it smart. Let me tell you, if your father had agreed to dissolve the way my dad wanted to, things would have been different. But no, your father had to think of the employees, good will, and all that. Now he's cleaned out!" Bob's deep voice grew deeper. "Maybe my dad did make things worse during this past year by transferring customers into this bigger company so he could make a place for himself there, at a bigger salary too. He wanted security for us. He was thinking ahead, thinking of his family!"

"Bob, Bob," Kathy cried in bewilderment. "I don't know what you're talking about. I can't go to the prom with you because another boy asked me first. When you asked me—well, I just forgot all about him."

Bob's "Okay" was clipped and cold. "See you in class tomorrow," he said and hung up.

Kathy went into the living room and sank into her father's big green chair. "He didn't believe me," she murmured.

Thoughtfully she interlaced her fingers. When her mother entered the room Kathy, without looking up, asked, "Is it true about Mr. Lansford? Is he the thief Jane was talking about yesterday? It was accounts, customers he stole, wasn't it?"

Mrs. Parker cried out. When Kathy saw her mother's pale face she crossed the room quickly and sat beside her on the sofa. "Mums, I'm sorry. I didn't intend to eavesdrop, and I wasn't going to let on I knew."

"I guess it's just as well," said her mother, taking her hand. "Then you know we're moving to Vickers Circle?"

"Yes."

The lavender scent her mother always used became suddenly dear to Kathy as Mums hugged her close and attempted a smile. "It won't be so bad, kitten," she said. "I used to visit Vickers Circle when I was a child. It's a nice town. You can have Lucy up for a visit any time. All of your friends will be welcome."

"I know that," said Kathy.

She wanted to ask about Mr. Lansford, but her mother kept talking with growing enthusiasm about their new home, about the old carriage house where Dad would start his new business, about acres and acres of pine-studded hills and the trim green-and-white gardener's cottage where they would live.

"Of course," her mother went on, "we own only my grandfather's share of the estate. Mrs. Vickers, my great-uncle's widow, owns half the land and the big house on the hill. I hear she's as strong-willed as ever." Mrs. Parker gave Kathy another hug. "Oh, well, you'll be going off to school anyway. Upstate is only a four-hour drive from the Circle."

Warily Kathy asked, "Will I be able to go? Can we afford it now?"

"So you heard that too. I'm sorry," said her mother. "As

of now there is no reason why you can't go to the university in the fall. Of course, there's always a chance things won't work out as we plan. But they should. Dad should be able to establish the new business right away. He's starting small, and we realized enough on this house to tide us over until things get going. There's always a risk, however. You understand that, dear?"

"I guess so," said Kathy slowly. "But Mr. Lansford avoided the risk. That's what Bob said. Jane called him a thief. I don't think that's fair when all he wanted was security for his family. He loves them."

"Your sister shouldn't have said what she did. However, I can't agree that Mr. Lansford has accomplished security, real security for his family." Mrs. Parker rose and walked toward the rain-spattered windows. "I know you don't mean that you think Mr. Lansford loves his family more than Dad loves us."

"Oh, no. It's confusing though. You want the best for people you love." Love. There it was again, thought Kathy. A different love than she and Lucy usually discussed, but as puzzling right now.

"Someday you'll discover, I hope, that Dad is giving you the best, the only best."

"Are you mad at the whole Lansford family?" Kathy couldn't help asking. "Bob said so."

Mrs. Parker shook her head slowly, sadly. "Disappointed in Mr. Lansford, yes. Not angry, and certainly not at Bob." She cast a surprised look at Kathy. "You're not thinking, are you, that I insisted you refuse Bob's invitation for any

reason other than that you already had promised someone else?"

"Not really," admitted Kathy, "but I still think—"

"I've no objections to your going out with Bob any other time." Mother leaned closer to the window. "Dad's early, because of the rain, I suppose. Goodness, I had better get supper started."

She must have stopped him in the kitchen. Kathy could hear their low buzzing talk. "Poor kid," she heard her father say. Count on him, thought Kathy, to realize how turning down the prom with Bob Lansford hurt. She listened for his step in the hall, more than ready for some sympathy.

When he appeared in the living-room doorway, however, his first words were: "Your mother tells me you're being a good sport about moving. I know it's hard on you, Kathy."

Mother probably hadn't thought her broken, shattered dream worth mentioning! Honestly! A pained cry almost escaped, but after a glance at her father, so concerned, so in need of cheering up, Kathy jumped to her feet and kissed his cheek.

"I'll admit it would have been pretty awful if we'd had to move last year. But, after all, I'm graduating in June. It's sort of the end of things as they were anyway. And a beginning too, of course."

"Yes," he said, "don't forget, you're starting at Upstate in September. I'll do all in my power to see to that!" He looked around the spacious living room. "I expected you to be married right in this room, the same as your sister."

With a tired sigh he sank into his chair and stretched out his legs.

Determined now to take his mind off what soon would be the past, Kathy said: "Mums says you're starting with a small contract to assemble amplifiers. Tell me, what's it like up there?"

"At Circle's End, you mean?"

"What?" Kathy squealed.

"That's the name of the estate. Circle's End." Dad was close to a smile already.

"What a silly name, because they don't, do they? Circles don't end." She twisted a lock of her blonde hair. "They go round and round forever, like the seasons."

Mr. Parker laughed out loud. "You're right, but that's what the property is called. I suppose because it's located at the far end of Vickers Circle." He looked at her curiously. "What's up, kitten? You look inspired about something."

"I am. Circle's End. That's a perfect title for the Senior Farewell." She scratched through the desk drawer for pad and pencil, and bounced onto a sofa.

Her father removed his glasses and began polishing them with his handkerchief. For the first time in months Kathy saw no tired lines in his face. "That's quite an idea," he said thoughtfully. "You know, Emerson used the circle for various analogies in one of his essays. Every end is a beginning, was one thing he said, I remember—almost exactly what you said before about graduation."

"Me and Emerson," Kathy crowed. "Circle's End. Yes,

it's just what I want for that bittersweet flavor." She chattered on, happy to see her father's smile reach his eyes once more. A little amazed too. She suspected that, even at his age, he was considering "being cleaned out" as Bob had called it, not an end but a beginning.

Not until her pencil stopped flying from paragraph to paragraph did the ache return. Strangely, it was not remembrance of the forfeited date with Bob that brought it back, it was the image of Lucy's sadly sloped shoulders as she had gone out the door.

# 3

"RESILIENT AS A RUBBER BALL." THAT'S HOW SHE HAD HEARD herself proudly described by her mother for the past three weeks now, every time someone asked, "How is Kathy adjusting to the move upstate?" However, she felt far from proud of herself as, staring woodenly ahead, she passed Lucy in the school cafeteria again without speaking.

The words, "I'm sorry," just wouldn't come out. Lying in bed at night, Kathy would wonder if this was because she wasn't really sorry at all. Lucy should have stood by her, helped her explain to Mums how important going to the prom with Bob was. Lucy should say she was sorry. Then in the morning, facing the bleak best-friendless day, Kathy would decide that it didn't matter who was right. This silence between them was wrong. Day by day it was growing, like a tangible thing, like a thorned hedge that soon would permit no contact between them, ever. She would vow to break through the barrier before it was too late. Then, when Lucy walked into sight she froze, speechless.

Now here it was April. Easter vacation started next week.

Always she and Lucy went into the city then. They saw a show at the Music Hall and lunched later at a foreign restaurant, and this would be the last time as high-school girls.

"Rats!" Kathy muttered. Pivoting between two of the long gleaming cafeteria tables, she hurried back to where Lucy sat, moodily nibbling a sandwich. After she pulled out a chair and sat down beside her friend, however, she found it impossible to turn her head. From the tail of her eye she could see Lucy staring straight ahead too. Now what, thought Kathy with desperation.

Lucy put down her sandwich and covered a cough with her hand. Kathy jumped at the opportunity. "You've caught cold," she said quickly.

"No, only a crumb in my throat," mumbled Lucy.

"Oh, I'm glad." Kathy knew this sounded stupid. Her nose felt shiny. Probably every freckle showed, and when she turned to face Lucy she bumped her knee clumsily against the table leg. A sudden desire to run possessed her until she saw Lucy watching her with dark troubled eyes. Kathy said in a rush, "I should have apologized ages ago."

"What I heard today isn't so, is it?" was Lucy's response. "Kathy! You're not moving away after graduation, are you?"

When Kathy nodded, tears filled Lucy's eyes. "These last months must be doubly important to you now. Oh, you should be going to the prom with someone you feel special about. To think I let you down." Her voice broke. "What a dreadful friend I was."

Kathy gave Lucy's shoulder a little shake. "You were a good friend. I—I can prove it."

She searched her mind for proof to strengthen the ray of hope in Lucy's eyes. "Now, a friend is one who cares about your problems. Agreed? Well then,"Kathy improvised hastily, "if you had sat reading a magazine or begun filing your nails during the disagreement about the prom date, shown no interest either way, then you would have been a terrible friend. Really no friend." Kathy's handkerchief was a damp ball in the palm of her hand. "Only a good friend is concerned about what you do or don't do. Can't you see?" she asked, all at once realizing that she had hit on a truth.

"Yes, I do," said Lucy slowly, "because the news about your moving concerned me all right. I've felt shattered all morning." She pushed aside her sandwich.

"I'm not hungry either," said Kathy. Now that the trouble with Lucy was over, the move to Vickers Circle took first place. "Let's go out of doors until the bell rings."

Once outside Lucy shivered and looked up at the overcast sky. "More rain. Spring! A very overrated season."

"Oh, you don't mean that." Kathy took a deep breath. "Damp but sweet, and look." She pointed to where the sun cast a golden shaft between the dismal clouds spotlighting a clump of jonquils. "And see the azaleas around the flagpole all budded, ready to burst into bright bold splashes."

"Save that eloquence for your career," Lucy retorted

drily, but she smiled. "I suppose I'll get used to the idea of your leaving Floral City, and anyway, we'll be going to Upstate together."

"If we're accepted," Kathy reminded her.

Lucy's thumb flew to her lips. "Yes, if."

"Jabber, jabber. If? If what?" a deep mocking voice broke in.

It was Bob Lansford, and when the girls confessed their fears about being accepted he grinned. "I'll get in. My dad is fixing it. He's an alumnus of Upstate."

"So is my mother, my sister and my brother," snapped Kathy, surprised at her own annoyance. "What's that to do with it?"

"Get them all to write letters to the dean and put in a good word for you, and your worries are over." Bob flipped his hand.

"I wouldn't—I couldn't do that, could you, Lucy?"

Her friend looked uneasy. "I don't know about you. I couldn't. No one in my family ever went to college. I'll have to get in on my own."

"That's tough," said Bob with honest sympathy. "But, Kath, you're foolish if you don't—"

"I'll stay foolish, thank you," she said.

Then Bob smiled. She had to smile back. Didn't she hope every morning that he would stop and talk? When he did, didn't she treasure the moment long after?

"How about Senior Day at the beach, Kath? Got a date? Or, should I say, would you be allowed to go with me?" Bob cocked an eyebrow.

"No—yes—I haven't a date. Yes, I can go with you," Kathy said, trying not to show her elation.

"Good." Bob turned to Lucy. "Why don't you and Jim make it a foursome? I'll drive."

Lucy nodded her delight, and after Bob left, the girls caught each other's sidelong glances. Each stifled a happy giggle.

"Aren't you bursting?" Kathy said finally. "Don't you take back what you said about spring now?"

"Spring is marvelous!" Lucy forgot she was eighteen and skipped. "Just think, vacation next week. We'll go into the city—"

"After that the prom," Kathy broke in blissfully, "and then the seniors' beach picnic and graduation."

"You're forgetting midterms and the letter," said Lucy.

"Of course I am." Kathy tilted her saucy nose. "The way I feel now, nothing can go wrong. I have a date, an important date, with Bob after all." She spun on her heel and then frowned at her friend's changed expression. "Don't tell me the black mood is upon you again?"

"No," Lucy said softly. "I was thinking though, about you and Bob. About you, especially. You—well, you shy away from facing things head on. You're like that, you know." She looked wary. "Promise you won't get mad now, if I tell you something?"

"Promise," said Kathy. "But aren't you happy that I'm going to Senior Day with the boy I'm—yes, the boy I'm in love with?"

"That's just it. I wonder if you can be in love with a

person you don't like. Now wait." Lucy's dark eyes were anxious. "Perhaps I'm wrong, but you looked at Bob Lansford with plain dislike when he boasted about using his father's influence to get into the university."

"Oh, Lucy! People in love argue. Mums and Dad could never agree on the best route to our camp."

"That's trivial," her friend insisted. "You and Bob were arguing about something—well, something fundamental."

"Don't be silly." Kathy's high good humor denied the twinge of doubt her friend's observation had started. "Let's talk about our dresses for the dance. And we'll have to buy new bathing suits for the beach picnic. Oh, I know everything will go beautifully right through to graduation!"

Everything started beautifully. Both Kathy and Lucy passed their midterms with better than average marks, and the Wednesday after Easter was crisp and shining, a perfect day for their trip to the city.

After a spiraling climb up the Statue of Liberty and a breathless peek through the slit in her crown, the girls took the subway uptown and emerged among the labyrinths of Rockefeller Center. It was too nice a day for a three-hour-long show. A tour of a television studio would be more fun, they decided.

The pleasant young man in a dark-blue uniform with gold braid and buttons escorted them, along with five others, through the make-believe world. Thick carpets hushed their steps as they entered a glass-enclosed balcony and peered down into a great arena. The concrete floor was dotted with sets—half a kitchen in the corner, an out-

door terrace here, half a living room there. Except for the huge free-wheeling cameras it might have been a furniture showroom, until a tall handsome man holding a sheaf of papers walked across the floor.

Kathy nudged her friend excitedly. "I've seen him on TV lots of times."

"How would you like to see yourself televised," asked the uniformed guide. "Come along."

Soon the girls, along with other visitors, were following him down another hall and into a small, windowless room. Each took a turn stepping before the cameras beneath glaring lights. Lucy's eyes grew so round when she looked over and saw herself on the monitor's screen that Kathy bent with laughter.

"Wasn't that a blast?" said Lucy as they lifted their faces to the warm April sun. "Here's a cab. Shall we ride over and tour the United Nations again?"

"All right," agreed Kathy. "Then let's go to that Hungarian restaurant, the one with the fortuneteller."

Fortunetelling was an art, the girls agreed during the train ride home. "Actually," said Lucy, "she told us so many things that some are bound to come true."

"Such as my disappointment?" asked Kathy.

"Only a temporary disappointment, remember," said her friend earnestly.

"Lucy," cried Kathy, laughingly, "you don't think I'm taking it seriously? Oh, perhaps," she went on breezily, "I won't be able to find the right prom dress on the first shopping trip. That would be a temporary disappointment."

However, "her" dress, a frothy pale-blue chiffon, was hanging on the rack in Finch's department store the first Saturday she and her mother went looking.

Lucy wore yellow, and since the motif of the seniors' dance was Spring Flowers Mr. Parker christened them "Bluebell" and "Daffodil." "The fairest flowers of them all," he declared as they went off with the boys.

Kathy's escort forgot his aversion to dancing when Kathy promised to send him rock specimens from Vickers Circle. They danced every dance, until the strains of "Home Sweet Home" drifted from the flower-decked bandstand. Later, at the restaurant where they all went for steaks and French fries, Kathy danced with every boy classmate, including Bob Lansford.

"The most wonderful Senior Prom ever," she decided, with a happy tired sigh.

At the beach on Senior Day they all were noisier than usual. "The strain of watching the mailbox is telling on everyone," commented Kathy, spreading her blanket on the sand.

"If you had done what I suggested," Bob began.

"Please, let's not talk about that," she said. "Race you to the water."

Her new rose swim suit felt a part of her as she dove into the first big breaker and arched up only to vanish again beneath a higher white-tipped swell. Bob was beside her when she surfaced again, and together they swam into the calm beyond the waves.

"Kath," said Bob as they faced each other and treaded

water. "When are you leaving for Vickers Circle? Or don't you want to talk about it?"

"I guess I don't."

She held her nose and disappeared under water, searching the salty blackness with open eyes to discourage the first stinging tears of homesickness. How could she have taken everything for granted? Long Island was her home. Never would she feel the same about another place. This must be yet another kind of love, she thought, the deep-rooted love for the place where you were born and grew up.

Bob Lansford joined her underwater search. His grin, distorted by the rippling water, made Kathy laugh. When she pushed to the surface her lashes were starred, her eyes bright. This was the day she had looked forward to. Sad thoughts mustn't spoil it.

Seniors were more plentiful than clamshells on the hot, white sand. Lively banter arose above the ocean's cadenced pounding. At about four o'clock one long bony boy rolled over, clutched his middle and moaned that he was starving. All the girls began opening thermos jugs and passing out sandwiches, pickles, and potato chips and cookies.

"Have a cupcake," said Lucy proudly. "I made them myself."

Bob winked. "Watch out, Jim."

"I'm sure they're as good, or better, than he'll get in the Navy!" Lucy pretended indignation.

"The Navy?" asked Kathy.

"I didn't know about it until this morning," admitted Lucy. "I think it's wonderful."

"Congratulations, Jim," said Kathy promptly. She turned to Bob, but his attention had been diverted by the sight of her prom escort and two of his geology-minded friends. Heads bent, they walked along the water's edge.

"Specimen-hunting again. What creeps!" Bob muttered. Then his dark brows arched. His face brightened. He turned down the radio's volume and whispered, "Hey, want to have some fun?" He nodded toward the three boys. "I'll tell them an announcement just came over the radio about a scholarship from the State Conservation Department for, let's see, for the biggest collection of crab claws! You back me up now!" He jumped to his feet.

Kathy saw both Lucy and Jim redden beneath their tans but they said nothing. She stood up, letting her cake roll away.

"You can't do that, Bob," she said in a low voice. "At the prom that boy told me he isn't sure yet whether he can afford college. He might take you seriously."

"He might." Bob grinned. "But it's all in fun.

"No." Kathy put her hand on his arm. "Please."

He scowled and kicked up the sand. "Okay. It was only a joke. Killjoy," he muttered.

"Say, how about going up to the boardwalk for some games?" Lucy hurriedly changed the subject and tugged Jim to his feet.

After beating Lucy and Jim at paddle tennis, Kathy and Bob raced into the sea once more. Then in no time, it seemed, fires were blazing along the beach. A guitar led

them through their favorite songs before strumming into "Auld Lang Syne."

A perfect Senior Day, one to remember always, thought Kathy, as they drove towards home. That Bob's idea of fun had marred the occasion she at once denied. As she told Lucy the next day on the telephone, Bob wouldn't have gone through with that joke at some other boy's expense, not after he stopped and thought.

"That's just it," retorted Lucy. "He doesn't stop and think about other people. There, I've said it. Are we still friends?"

"Friends," said Kathy with an exasperated sigh. "I guess we'll have to agree to disagree about Bob Lansford, for the time being."

"I called about something else," Lucy went on. "I don't know whether I can go up to Vickers Circle with you after graduation."

"Why not?" cried Kathy. "You're not going to work until after the Fourth of July."

"Relatives expect to visit us, but the date isn't definite. I'm still hoping."

"Another thing I'll have to keep my fingers crossed for," groaned Kathy. "The letter from the University, regents, and now your relatives."

After a strange pause, followed by some throat-clearing, Lucy said, "Did your mail come yet?"

At that moment Kathy heard the metal mailbox click open and shut. "Hold the line!"

Her chest felt cramped as she ran out to the front steps. Lucy had received some word from Upstate she knew.

Fearfully Kathy drew forth the letters and flicked through them. *The* letter had arrived! She tore it open. *We take pleasure in informing you*—it began.

"Wheee!" She let out a joyous shriek and rushed back to the phone. Then a terrible thought struck her. Suppose Lucy's letter hadn't started the same way. However, when she picked up the phone Lucy giggled. "I heard you. Me too."

"Oh," Kathy waved the letter. "We're practically on our way!"

Two weeks later Mrs. Parker closed the last suitcase. Kathy carried it out to the car. Regents were over and passed. Graduation had become a never-to-be-forgotten memory of classmates suddenly transformed into solemn dignity, row upon row of gowned figures with golden tassels swinging from their mortarboards as they filed past the lectern to receive their diplomas.

Kathy's diploma had been stored in the family strong box. It was already on its way to Vickers Circle in the moving van, along with the furniture the Parkers hadn't sold with the house. Mr. Parker had gone on ahead the day after graduation. Now Mrs. Parker and Kathy waited only for some word from Lucy before driving up to join him.

Kathy cried out with relief when Lucy's family car turned the corner. Lucy hopped out carrying her suitcase and ran up the driveway.

"I can go! I can go! My relatives, bless them, have postponed their visit."

"We're off to Vickers Circle," said Kathy as Mrs. Parker

started the motor. "Don't," she said softly. Her mother was blinking back tears. Swallowing away her own choking sensation. Kathy managed to say: "Now, Mums, we won't look back. We'll keep thinking about reaching the Circle. A nice friendly town, you said. Remember?"

# 4

CIRCLE'S END

KEEP OUT PRIVATE ROAD

NO TRESPASSERS ALLOWED

E. VICKERS, *Owner*

The black-lettered sign swung from a chain across the entrance road.

"Well!" Kathy peered through the windshield. "E. Vickers must be my Great-great-aunt Emily. I've never met her. Now I'm not sure I want to."

"Mmm, *keep out!*" Lucy commented. "Does that mean us too?"

Mrs. Parker laughed. "Certainly not. This road goes right through to Clovedale, so everyone would be using it for a short cut if it weren't for that chain. Take it down, will you, girls? Then put it back after I drive in."

After helping replace the linked barrier, Lucy hopped back into the car. Kathy stood a moment, looking up the winding drive. Far off to the left she could see a mansard roof of faded green, Aunt Emily's stronghold, no doubt.

On the other side of the road, about a quarter of a mile distant, the roofs of two smaller buildings showed through the trees, their new home and Dad's new plant.

Beyond, along the western horizon, rippled a low range of the serenely blue Catskill Mountains. Kathy looked down, outlining with her toe one of the crumbling rosy bricks with which the road was laid, then she hugged her sweater around her shoulders and ran to the car. It looked so lonely. Rocks and pine trees everywhere, and over all, those aloof, unchanging hills.

However, she smiled brightly at her mother and as they drove slowly along Mrs. Parker told of a happy childhood summer she had spent with her grandparents here.

"When they died the property was divided," she explained. "Aunt Emily does own this road. However, she couldn't deny us access to our property even if she wanted to. That would be against the law."

Aunt Emily Vickers knew the law down to the last letter, they soon discovered. Mr. Parker pushed at the nosepiece of his glasses more than once as he told about his unsuccessful attempt to come to an agreement with the aging widow of Mrs. Parker's great-uncle.

"Don't misunderstand. Aunt Emily seems overjoyed that we've moved up here. She's even offered to deed over her share of the old shale-brick factory on the other side of the abandoned railroad tracks for my new business. Of course I thanked her, but I made it clear that I haven't the funds to start operations on so large a scale. She then made her terms clear."

"Do you mean, Dad," asked Kathy, "that even if she agreed to the rezoning of the property on this side of the tracks, she wouldn't let you use her road for commercial purposes?"

"Exactly," said her father. "She has the law on her side too." He rubbed his chin. "I should have foreseen this, but the Town Board members were so eager for this new business when I first talked to them that I assumed there would be no trouble."

"Then the board can rezone our property for business in spite of Aunt Emily's protest?" asked Mrs. Parker.

"Yes. I don't want any hard feelings though. I've asked them to wait. Still, I have to meet the deadline on that contract if I ever expect to get another. I've already advertised for help."

"Vickers Circle hasn't had railroad service for over thirty years," said Kathy's mother with a worried frown. "When I was a little girl a spur ran right through this property. The engineer used to stop and let us out below the cornfield and we'd walk up the wagon trail. We hardly ever used the road. But today——Matt, how can we transport goods to and from the Clovedale station unless we use that road?"

Mr. Parker shook his head. "Frankly, that problem has me stumped."

"You'll think of a way out," said Kathy's mother firmly. "We'll talk about it after lunch, if I can find the dishes. You girls go exploring until I decide where to begin." She looked at the chairs, crates, and barrels the moving men had zigzagged into the living room. "I think the things

we've held on to will fit in very well. This little house is nicer than I remembered."

"It's adorable!" Lucy clasped her hands, her dark eyes darting from the fieldstone fireplace to the diamond-paned casement windows. "It reminds me of one of those country cottages in an English movie, quaint, and so cozy."

Upstairs, Lucy exclaimed again over the slant ceiling and dormered windows of the bedroom she would share with Kathy during her visit. When she looked out and saw the sparkling curve of a creek she squealed with delight. Kathy remained silent.

"What's wrong?" Lucy asked, lifting her overnight bag onto one twin bed.

"Everything!" Kathy threw herself across the other bed and pressed her face against the rough mattress cover. Once the tears started it seemed they would never stop.

Lucy sat quietly beside her for a while. Then, with no-nonsense efficiency, she brought a cool wet handkerchief for her face.

"Put on your jeans." she said. "We're going for a hike now. When we come back to help your mother we can have some lunch. I'm not hungry and I guess you're not either. Besides, you don't want your mother to see you've been crying."

Sunglasses hid Kathy's reddened eyes, giving her a feeling of privacy. As she and Lucy scrambled over rocks and slid on their heels down grassy embankments, she began analyzing her recent despair. Homesickness and change were only part of it. Learning the obstacles to her father's new

business venture had unleashed her tears. If it failed—

"I realize now that some of my tears were selfish," she said to Lucy. "I was thinking there might not be enough money for Upstate in September if Dad loses his first contract. Oh, that's awful! Instead of wondering how I could help, I thought only of myself."

She looked to her friend for some comment, but Lucy had stopped short. Eyes round, she pointed to a clump of pines on the other side of the narrow creek they had been about to cross.

Kathy leaned forward and listened. She too heard rustling across the way. Twigs snapped beneath a heavy tread. Iron clattered against stone. Recognizing that sound, she laughed.

"It's only a horse."

"I know it is." Lucy's voice quivered. "I saw his tail swish. Let's go back."

"All right," said Kathy sympathetically, for she knew her friend was afraid of horses. She looked over her shoulder. "Which way is back though?"

"Don't tell me we're lost! Hurry, let's run anywhere to get away from that—that animal before he comes after us!"

Kathy bent and peered across the creek. "There's a boy —no, it's a girl astride him, Lucy," she said soothingly. "That horse is reined in. Expertly controlled, in fact," she added, getting a better view of the rider.

Quieting her chestnut mount with an ease that revealed long familiarity, both with horses and this rocky, wooded

terrain, the girl slouched in the saddle and stared off into space. Patched sunlight burnished her copper-colored hair. Why, thought Kathy, had she spoiled its beauty with that ragged, boyish haircut?

"You stay here," said Kathy. "I'll go over and ask her for directions. She seems to know these woods."

Lucy nodded and Kathy ran down the slope and across the narrow creek. She saw a splintered sign nailed to an old, gnarled tree. Faint, weatherworn letters warned; NO HUNTING—G. & G. WEIGHLUND, OWNERS. She was trespassing, Kathy realized, but when she explained surely the girl would understand.

"Miss! Miss Weighlund!" she called, looking up.

The girl jerked to attention and searched her surroundings with startled eyes. When her glance met Kathy's, her lips tightened. Without a word she wheeled her horse and cantered off.

Kathy put her hands on her hips and started back to her friend. "How do you like that for courtesy? She's old enough to know better too, in her twenties, I'd say."

"Never mind. We've all afternoon to find our way." Lucy's color had returned. When Kathy told her about the Weighlund property across the creek, she said thoughtfully, "This, then, is your western boundary. Your Aunt Emily's property is south. To get back, we should head north or east."

"If we follow this creek," said Kathy with an adventurous glint in her eye, "I'll bet we'll discover it's the same one that runs behind our carriage house."

She ran on ahead, skirting jagged rocks and thorned vines with the gay abandon of a lamb out for its first frolic. Lucy followed. With the "animal" gone, her daring returned. She raced past Kathy with a triumphant shout, leaped into a clearing of tall grass and then suddenly disappeared.

Kathy cried out, "Quicksand!" That was her first thought as she ran to the spot where her friend had vanished.

"Lucy! Lucy!" she cried again and again.

"Don't step on me too," said a small voice at her feet. "Oh, I'm all right, except for a skinned elbow."

Kathy looked down. "What happened? Oh," she said as her foot struck metal, "you tripped over these railroad tracks."

"Uh-huh." Lucy grimaced. "Serves me right for acting so immature." She stood up and brushed at her jeans.

Kathy pointed down a waving ribbon of high weeds and grass. "This must be the old railroad spur into Vickers Circle, and, branching off to the right up there, is the old wagon trail Mums told about. It leads right to our carriage house. We're not lost any more. And, oh, look! Over there on the other side of the tracks is the old factory."

Ivy dignified its loneliness. The brick building conveyed patient waiting, she thought to herself. Lucy never understood such fanciful notions.

Kathy ran her fingers through her short fair hair and wrinkled her nose. "Why, here's a short cut between the Circle and Clovedale all cleared of rocks and trees. Why haven't they taken up these old tracks and put down whatever they put on roads?"

"I see your point," said Lucy. "If this were a road, your father's new business wouldn't be dependent on your Aunt Emily's change of mind—or heart." She hunched her shoulders. "There's probably a reason why it hasn't become a highway. Maybe we could find out in the library. If there is a library."

Kathy removed her sunglasses and put them in her pocket. New excitement surged. "We'll chug along these old tracks right into the Circle and ask!"

Lucy raised her arm and shouted, "Lead on!"

"Wait," said Kathy, seeing her friend's elbow. It wasn't bleeding much but it was a larger scrape than she had realized. "Shouldn't we take care of that first?"

However, nothing must delay their investigation of the "road that should have been," Lucy insisted. "Besides, I'm thirsty. I hope there's an ice-cream store in Vickers Circle."

Kathy laughed. "I'm sure there is. It isn't a ghost town, you know."

Half an hour later Kathy was ready to take back her glib remark. "Why, even the leaves on the trees are still," she said as they passed another empty store, then another shuttered house. "I feel we should be tiptoeing."

The shady flagstone walk led to a high-stooped wooden building. It housed both the United States Post Office and a general store. Inside, the sleepy-eyed proprietor silently pointed to a dispensing machine when the girls asked for cold soda, and answered Kathy's query about the library with another wordless gesture.

"Up this way, I guess," she said, following Lucy down

the wooden steps. Though refreshed by the drink, the gray-haired man's lethargy had somewhat deflated her spirits. "Do you suppose this is a ghost town after all?"

"I'm sure we haven't reached the real shopping center yet," said Lucy staunchly. They passed under a creaking rusty sign marked VICKERS INN. At least that harbored some life—two women rocked on its ground-level porch. Then they crossed a narrow planked bridge.

"No!" That can't be the library," said Kathy, staring at a cedar-shingled structure no larger than a barn. Then she saw that it had once been not a barn, but a mill. The mill-wheel hub still projected over the creek bank.

Lucy nodded toward the flaked lettering over the double screen doors. "Library! That's what it says. Well, this has a much larger lawn that most," she consoled.

Dead silence rather than library quiet reigned within. Yet the inky, musty smell of books that Kathy loved was there, and the tall, smiling woman who greeted them spoke in the hushed tone of librarians everywhere.

"I'm Miss Sands," she whispered. "May I help you girls? Or would you prefer to browse around by yourselves?"

Kathy introduced herself and her friend, then told about finding the old railroad spur and their curiosity as to why no road had replaced it.

"We're interested because of my father's new business."

"I understand," said the librarian, fingering one of her big earrings. "I know all about Mr. Parker's venture and I sympathize. He faces tremendous odds. The town stopped talking about building that road years ago. Obtaining a re-

lease from one property owner proved too much trouble. In fact, talk of any improvements seems to have stopped altogether in Vickers Circle." She paused and then added slowly, "This is a dying town."

"Dying?" A chill stole over Kathy. Who would expect this?

"You're surprised. I don't wonder. Newspapers and magazines are filled with community problems caused by rapid growth throughout our entire country. That fact has contributed to the Circle's decline. The need to count pennies no longer keeps people here. If they can't sell their homes and businesses, they move anyway, knowing they can do better elsewhere."

"Then how can a town be saved from dying?" There must be something somebody could do, thought Kathy.

Miss Sands bent her neatly coiffed head over some papers on her desk. "I'm trying, without much success so far, to answer that question as part of my thesis." She flushed and looked up. Then a dimple appeared in her cheeks. "I'm a sham librarian. The teachers who keep this place open during the school year can't be expected to volunteer their vacations too, so I take over summers."

"Otherwise it would close?" asked Kathy.

"Yes. I have another reason for donating my services here," she confessed. Her glance traveled fondly over the tightly packed book shelves. "Here's where my love of learning began. I find it an ideal spot to study for my doctorate. I'm an assistant professor at Upstate University."

Lucy shrieked that they were headed for Upstate in

September. When Kathy shushed her, Miss Sands laughed and said in a normal voice:

"Habit makes me whisper. You can shout all you like in this library. There's no one to disturb." She turned toward the reference shelves. "Let me see. Here are some maps. And this is a brief outline of the town's history. Spread them out on the table. I'll be at my desk if you need me."

Kathy traced the creek with her finger. "Here's where we met that girl on horseback. Here's the railroad you tripped over, Lucy. From the Circle, it goes through only our property until it runs into Weighlunds'."

"Then Weighlunds', only a seventeen-acre strip, lies between your land and the Clovedale highway," said Lucy. She turned in the chair and rested her bruised arm across its back. "Weighlund, that's an unusual name."

Miss Sands cut short this musing by her shocked exclamation. "Where did you get that scrape?" When Lucy explained, the tall slender woman became stern. "Imbedded gravel and dirt can cause a serious infection. That needs medical attention at once. You should have an antitetanus shot."

The brown-haired girl cringed at the word "shot" and Miss Sands' voice softened. "Dr. Nilson is less than half a mile down the road. He's a wonderful person. Gentle and kind. Quite young too, for a doctor. You'll like him." She smiled a dreamy distant smile as though she had forgotten the girls' presence.

Why, she's young, for a professor, and nice looking too,

thought Kathy. "Come on, Lucy, Miss Sands is right about that arm." At the screen doors she turned. "We'll tell Dr. Nilson you sent us."

"No! Please, no. You see"—The professor hid her confusion by bending over the papers on her desk— "I'd appreciate your not mentioning my name at all."

"All right," said Kathy, "but—"

"I'll keep your interests in mind, girls," interrupted Miss Sands. "Hurry along now."

Once out of earshot, Kathy's quick conjecture exploded into words. "I'll bet Miss Sands has a secret crush on this Dr. Nilson."

"You're an incurable romantic."

"Huh! You're not, I suppose."

Lucy winked.

Dr. Brandley Nilson's waiting room had two soft leather sofas and a table piled high with slippery magazines. Geraniums bloomed on the wide window sill.

"My impression of Vickers Circle is gradually improving," said Kathy as they relaxed against the cushioned leather. "From that Weighlund girl's hostility, to the postmaster's indifference, to Miss Sands' helpfulness—and now this. What a pleasant room. I'm sorry, Lucy," she added, at once contrite.

"I'm trying not to think about it," said Lucy. She leafed through a magazine then put it aside. "What a shame," she said in a low voice, "that we gave our word not to mention Miss Sands' name. Perhaps the doctor has been admiring her from afar too."

Kathy immediately joined in the diversion her friend needed right now. "I agree," she whispered. "Wouldn't it be fun to play cupid and introduce them?"

A derisive catcall from behind made both girls jump. Kathy turned onto her knees and leaned over the back of the sofa. A tousle-headed boy sat hunched over a comic book. "Stupid girls," he said when he saw her looking down at him.

"That isn't a polite thing to say," chided Kathy.

"Nah, but it's true." He made a face at her. "Only stupid girls would talk about introducin' Miss Sands and Doc. They don't speak, not since they were s'posed to get married and didn't, a long time ago. *Every*buddy knows that! Go away! I don't like you lookin' at me like that." He threw the comic book up into her face.

"You freshy!" she began, but Lucy warned her to be quiet. The old-fashioned mahogany doors were rolling back. A woman stepped out. The boy rushed up to her and whispered in her ear and she, glaring at the girls, pulled him close. As she hurried him out, the boy turned and made another face.

Behind the tall, broad-shouldered doctor standing in the doorway, gleamed an antiseptically clean modern office. His white starched tunic matched its impersonal atmosphere, but his smile was knowing.

"Don't mind Hank," he said. "He's suffering from an overdose of mother love."

He beckoned the girls into his office, cleansed Lucy's bruise and administered the shot with gentle swiftness.

"This was an emergency, Dr. Nilson," explained Kathy. "Will you send my father the bill? Mr. Parker at Circle's End."

"Don't worry about it." The doctor leaned back and folded his arms across his chest. He was a big-boned man. When he frowned, as he suddenly did now, his heavy brow shadowed the warmth of his eyes. "Your father is the only reason I'm still here. Last March I was about to accept an offer from a city hospital. Then I heard about Mr. Parker's plans and I decided to wait and see."

"I don't understand," said Kathy.

Dr. Nilson toyed with the letter opener on his desk. "I don't want to leave Vickers Circle. I was born and raised here. On the other hand, I studied medicine to become useful, to help people. After five years of practice I find myself semiretired. My patients move away because they can't earn a living here. I can't help them in that respect. As a doctor I'm equipped to fight human disease, but a dying town needs industry. I'm hoping your father succeeds. So many have failed."

"Why have they failed?" asked Kathy.

"I don't know," admitted Dr. Nilson. He stood up then and smiled at Lucy. "Stop by in a few days and let me have a look at that elbow."

On the way home Kathy tried to think of other things, but the ominous words "a dying town" kept echoing through her mind. Why was it dying? Miss Sands had suggested no reason. Neither had the doctor.

After they ducked under Aunt Emily's chain and started

up the drive, Lucy clutched Kathy's hand. "There's that girl on that horse. Thank goodness, she's heading the other way."

"She came from our carriage house where Dad has set up shop." Kathy exhaled through her teeth. "I wonder what the frosty Miss Weighlund wanted."

Soon the girls discovered their error. "Her name isn't Weighlund," said Mr. Parker. "I have employed a Weighlund. Guy Weighlund, the postmaster's son. He's a reliable family man, if a little slow moving. Oddly enough, this man has a cousin by the same name living in Floral City. By inheritance they became joint owners of some land on our western boundary. They've never met, though, because of some ancient family feud. A lawyer handles their tax payments."

"Not another feud!" exclaimed Lucy.

"Who then," asked Kathy, "is that red-haired girl? Was she answering your advertisement for help too?"

"Yes," said her father, "and I employed her. Her name is Celeste Vickers, a fourth or fifth cousin-in-law of yours, Kathy. She's the young widow of Aunt Emily's grandson. He was killed in an auto crash two years ago, she told me." He rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I was glad to get her. She's quick, intelligent, and educated. I can't imagine why she wants to work here."

"Why, I've heard you're very nice to work for," said Kathy, but she thought she knew what her father meant. Most women preferred office work even though, with their lighter touch, they were better at wiring amplifiers than

men. "Perhaps she needs the money," suggested Kathy.

"No doubt of that. She has no family and lives in a furnished room over in Clovedale," said Mr. Parker. "I meant, though, that I shouldn't think she would want to come here five days a week and risk running into her late husband's grandmother. She tells me they don't speak."

"If this town is dying," said Kathy slowly, "I think it's being smothered to death by grim silence."

# 5

"Remember when we didn't speak to each other for three weeks because of that silly disagreement Bob Lansford's invitation started?" asked Kathy, while she and Lucy were dressing for breakfast the next day. 'If I had called you up the same evening, or if you had called me, that would have ended it. We let silence build a wall between us."

"Every day it got higher and thicker," Lucy agreed. "By the way, that letter Bob promised to write should arrive today."

"I haven't forgotten." Kathy brushed one lock of honey-colored hair across her forehead and studied the effect in the mirror. "I hope he does drive up for the Fourth of July."

She decided against confiding how much she thought about seeing him again. Lucy might repeat her conviction that she was only in love with love, that the Bob she dreamed about was an illusion completely at variance with the real person.

"Ummm," said Lucy sleepily. "What about that wall?"

"Oh, yes. I've concluded that there are several here in Vickers Circle." She ticked off on her fingers. "One between Miss Sands and Dr. Nilson. Another between the Weighlund cousins who have never met. And then between Celeste Vickers and Aunt Emily."

Lucy began brushing her hair before the mirror. "Don't forget Aunt Emily and the newly arrived Parkers."

"There's no wall yet," Kathy mumbled, applying a dash of lipstick. "You heard my mother say that Aunt Emily made a formal call here yesterday while we were out. It will be perfectly proper for us to call on her this afternoon, which we shall do."

"For goodness' sake, why?"

Kathy smiled mysteriously at her friend's startled reflection. "Because I have an idea from what Mums said that Aunt Emily's pet peeve is modern informality. Therefore, a visit from two mannerly girls wearing hats, stockings, and white gloves, might please her so much—well, she just might forget her objections to Dad's business."

When Lucy looked slightly disapproving, Kathy said defensively: "There's nothing wrong in making a good impression. I'm going to try hard to like her no matter what." She frowned. "I have a feeling that won't be easy. Mums didn't say a word about her appearance, but I can picture her—gaunt, sallow, and dressed all in black."

Aunt Emily Vickers did wear a black grosgrain ribbon around her throat, but her dress was pale pink and her smiling face as fresh and smooth as a doll's.

Kathy couldn't help being captivated by her silver-haired

relative's sprightly small talk, by the lustrous tea service, and the tiny white napkins embroidered with graceful *V's*. She recalled her tears of yesterday and marveled at the change twenty-four hours could bring. Bob Lansford's letter was in her purse. He would spend the holiday in Vickers Circle after driving to Upstate "to look over the accommodations," he wrote. Fourth of July, only a week away, glistened with promise. Yet she could not bear to wish away the time between. It was also the day of Lucy's departure. She wouldn't think about that until she had to.

Right now she and Lucy, dressed in their linen suits and flowered hats, were enjoying every minute in Aunt Emily's high-ceilinged, nineteenth-century drawing room. Furthermore, Aunt Emily, obviously pleased by their decorous call, had already relented on one point—she would not protest the rezoning of the Parker's share of Circle's End.

"For the time being," she stipulated. "If this new enterprise proves a nuisance I shall object vigorously. I distrust mechanical doings of any kind. Things blow up, catch fire. Dear me, I find it frightening. However, I've decided to accept your father's assurance that his work entails no such dangers. He has an honest face."

About the road, however, she remained adamant.

"My refusal is not the whim of a stubborn old woman, Kathy dear," said Mrs. Vickers. She set down her cup and saucer with a steady hand. "If I had allowed your father commercial use of my road, others would soon insist on the same privilege. That's the way change starts."

Kathy politely protested. "Don't you think, Aunt Emily, that some things have to change?"

"Some things," said her hostess, "but not Circle's End!" When both girls refused more tea she stood up and beckoned them to follow her.

A short flight of steps at the end of the cool dim hall brought them to another, narrower hall leading to high double doors. Aunt Emily swung them wide. "Wait here until I raise the blinds," she said.

"Why, it's almost like a museum," Kathy cried as sunlight revealed the spacious room's secret.

"It is a miniature museum," said Aunt Emily proudly. "Here at Circle's End the town's past is preserved."

"These must be Indian relics," said Kathy, bending over the nearest glass case. "Wampum, bowls, and—look, Lucy—here's one of those papoose baskets."

Lucy clasped her hands appreciatively.

"Yes, the first dwellers here were the Indians, of course. Then came the Dutch. Would you like to see sketches of the clothes they wore? Would you care to see it all?" The old lady's cheeks grew pinker when the girls eagerly assented.

Kathy puzzled over the old script, a copy of the town's new charter under English rule. She and Lucy listened to the story about the church bell now ensconced in folds of maroon velvet, sole salvage after a flood that wiped out the Circle in the 1750's.

"However, the people would not abandon their town. They set to and rebuilt it," Mrs. Vickers said. "In this

next case are reins from the oxen that helped transport cannon to General Washington during the Revolution. Now over here," she added, crossing to the other side of the room, "the treasures become more personal."

Both girls oohed and aahed over the heirlooms—dolphin candlesticks of amber glass, scalloped chocolate cups, a diary from one ancestor who had trekked west and some gold nuggets he had sent back.

They recoiled as Aunt Emily tried to hand them a manacle. "From a Negro slave my late husband's grandfather helped escape into Canada," she explained. "And here is a narrative poem my mother had published during her seventieth year."

"It's beautiful." Kathy gently touched the faded damask binding and read the title aloud, "*Legend of Emily.*"

"It is really a history of the family's women," explained her great-great-aunt. "My mother's name was Rose Emily. Her mother was called Emily Kate, as I am. I always hoped to place this little volume in a young Emily's hand one day, but—it wasn't to be." She blinked and muttered something about becoming too sentimental, then ushered the girls over to the last keepsake. "These red-shale bricks are less interesting to the feminine mind perhaps, but they brought our family considerable wealth at one time. They made Vickers Circle important too."

She took a step toward Kathy. "I still have hopes that your father will someday start the old factory humming again. My husband and your great-grandfather, Kathy, manufactured these road bricks there. Since World War I,

of course, better road materials have been found." A twinkle appeared in her eye. "Dear me, we mustn't get back on the subject of roads. You must see my porcelain collection in the next room. Come, girls."

They followed her into a small study. "Though I love the symbols of the past you have just seen," she went on, "I consider my guardianship of them a duty. Now my porcelains are neither useful nor historic, just beautiful, and quite an expensive hobby. Kind friends, though, do add to my hoard at Christmastime."

"Each one is different," exclaimed Lucy.

"The colors of this little bird are exquisite, Aunt Emily," said Kathy, "and this slender vase is darling."

"I'm glad you find my weakness understandable, Kathy dear," said Aunt Emily, but her attention had turned to Lucy who now stood behind the desk looking up at a large oil painting. "My grandson," said the silver-haired woman quietly. "He was killed in an automobile accident two years ago."

"Oh, I am sorry," said Lucy, flustered. "He is—he was a good-looking boy."

"Boy—yes, he was no more than a boy when that willful girl—" Mrs Vickers forcibly controlled herself. "Your mother will think I've kidnapped you and your friend," she said, smiling at Kathy. "Now promise you'll call again soon."

Back in the slant-ceilinged bedroom the girls changed into slacks and sweaters. The round old mountains banked the summer sun early and evenings were apt to be cool.

"Celeste must be the willful girl Aunt Emily referred to,"

said Kathy thoughtfully. "She must have objected to the marriage from the start."

"I'll bet it was one of those impulsive elopements. Probably it interfered with his education," suggested Lucy. "The girl is always blamed when things don't work out."

Kathy knelt at the window, watching the sunset streak ever-changing colors in the western sky.

"Why should the girl be blamed?" she said, suddenly fierce at the thought of such injustice. "Besides, you can't call it 'not working out' when accidental death ends everything."

"Your Aunt Emily might in someway blame Celeste for his death," said her friend.

"How could she? Oh, I think it's a shame. Aunt Emily's so anxious for company and her own grandson's wife must be lonely living in a furnished room. Psst! Lucy! There's Celeste now, coming out of the carriage house." Kathy pressed her forehead against the screen. "Yesterday she annoyed me. Now I feel sorry for her." She jumped to her feet. "I'm going to invite her to dinner. Mums won't mind. Come with me?"

Lucy shook her head and pursed her lips.

"Oh, the horse. I'm sure she left him home today." Kathy smiled. "All right, I'll start chipping away at that wall alone."

"Next I suppose you'll tackle the feud between Miss Sands and Dr. Nilson."

"I may." Kathy cast her friend a sly look from beneath her lashes as she left the bedroom.

Down in the driveway the short stocky young man took

his pipe from his mouth and acknowledged Mr. Parker's introduction of his daughter with a lazy smile.

Kathy smiled back. "My father says you have a cousin in Floral City, Mr. Weighlund."

"Uh, huh, but we've never met." He drew on his pipe and looked off toward the hills. "My wife and I drive down to the city every fall. We always plan to look him up, but you know how it is. There's never enough time. We always end up saying 'next year'."

"Then you're not angry. I mean—"Kathy stopped short, embarrassed.

"You mean that old family feud?" Weighlund's sleepy lids lifted. "No one remembers what started it. I never paid it any mind. No, it's as I said, just a case of putting off getting in touch."

"I'm glad you didn't put off getting in touch with Aunt Emily." Mr. Parker gave his daughter's arm a fond pat. "She telephoned the good news about withdrawing her rezoning protest. It's a good thing I brought materials up a little at a time a few months ago. We're going ahead on wiring and assembling. Later, we'll find a way of getting the finished amplifiers out of here."

"I told your daddy that if the town starts talking about that new road along the old railroad spur again, I'll get the road release from my cousin this time for sure," promised Guy Weighlund.

Kathy smiled in appreciation. Then, remembering her errand, she looked around. "Where is Celeste Vickers?"

"Out back saddling her mare," said Mr. Parker.

"So she did come on horseback."

Her father nodded. "Guy has only a short walk from town, but Celeste has no other way of getting here from Clovedale."

"I've given her special permission to short-cut through Weighlund's seventeen acres of rock and scrub. She would anyway." Guy laughed lazily. "She certainly wouldn't use Mrs. Vickers' road. They don't speak."

Everybody seemed to know everybody else's business here in the Circle, thought Kathy. Then she said, "I want to ask her to dinner, Dad."

Her father seemed surprised, but he made no comment.

Brushed to satin smoothness, the chestnut mare's symmetrical beauty contrasted sharply with her rider's scarecrow appearance. Ragged wisps of coppery hair framed Celeste Vickers' too-thin face. Her eyes seemed enormous. The shirt she wore was clean but torn at the collar, and her jeans were rolled up above her ankles. One sneaker lace dangled, untied.

Kathy introduced herself and then let the mare nuzzle against her shoulder. "How old is she?"

"Who? What? The horse? Oh, five years, about." Celeste threaded the reins between her fingers, obviously anxious to be off. When Kathy extended the dinner invitation the large eyes veiled. "Thank you, no," she said. As though to soften her curtness, she added, "I don't want to ride home after dark."

"Of course, I forgot." Kathy tilted her head. "I know. You can stable the horse here. My mother will drive you

home and get you in the morning. She'll be glad to. Mums is like that."

"I don't want any favors, only a job, thank you." Celeste's lips tightened into a thin line as they had the day before.

"You mustn't feel that way," Kathy said, but horse and rider were already making the turn around the carriage house.

At the table that evening Mums advised patient understanding. "I'm sure young Mrs. Vickers didn't mean to be rude. She's sensitive and no wonder, losing her husband after only six months of marriage. Of course he has been gone two years now. She should be getting out more, but if she prefers to be left alone, Kathy, better not meddle."

"I only wanted to bring her and Aunt Emily together. I really thought Celeste might be trying to break the ice. Otherwise, why would she choose to work here at Circle's End?"

"That thought occurred to me too," admitted Mrs. Parker. "But we mustn't barge into the personal lives of our new neighbors, kitten."

This was sound advice, Kathy knew. However, a few days later, when Dr. Nilson telephoned to say he would stop by to look at Lucy's elbow because he wanted to see Mr. Parker anyway, Kathy promptly telephoned the library and invited Miss Sands to tea.

Lucy's wound was declared "doing fine." Case dismissed, the doctor sauntered out to the new shop a few minutes before Miss Sands drove up. Unaware of any subterfuge,

Mrs. Parker left Miss Sands talking to the girls and went out to ask Dr. Nilson to have some refreshment. Quite as innocently, Mr. Parker ushered the doctor into the cozy living room while the girls sat ramrod straight, waiting for the clash.

Other than a quick intake of breath by the tall, big-boned doctor, and a slight rosy streak along Miss Sands' handsome jawline, nothing happened. They nodded—yes they had met before—and then joined in a lively discussion about Mr. Parker's transportation problem.

"I certainly will help you form a citizens' committee, Brandley," said Miss Sands to the doctor. "That was very farsighted of you, reviving interest in that proposed road along the old railroad route."

Dr. Nilson cleared his throat. "Too farsighted I'm afraid for Mr. Parker's immediate need, Ellie."

Kathy's father gestured toward the girls. "My good-will ambassadors over here made such a fine impression on Mrs. Vickers, I've almost enough courage to approach her again about using her road, for this first rush contract. If I can tell her there'll soon be a town highway to the Clovedale station that I can reach by the old wagon trail, she might agree."

"Mrs. Vickers has been known to relent for people she likes and trusts," said the doctor. "Meantime, the highway commissioner has promised action this summer if Guy Weighlund contacts his cousin as he promised. Once both Weighlunds sign the release, the new road can cut through their land." He frowned. "The money for this thing was set

aside years ago. It's been a case of indifference, Mr. Parker, that no businessman has bothered to challenge. Large concerns look for more progressive communities."

"Yes, Mrs. Parker," said Miss Sands solemnly, "you probably don't realize what your husband's success would mean to this town."

Dr. Nilson nodded. "It would be a break-through. Other industry would surely follow."

"All a matter of getting the first olive out of the bottle," said Mrs. Parker, and they all laughed.

Unnoticed, the girls slipped out and ran across the lawn toward the creek.

"Two walls are tumbling down," said Kathy. "The Weighlund cousins are going to meet and the doctor and Miss Sands are speaking." She threw her head back and laughed, running a little ahead of her friend. "Things look better for Dad's business already."

"You have a right to crow a little," conceded Lucy. "This town seems to need meddling."

"I wish something could be done about the break between Aunt Emily and Celeste. Oh, Lucy, you should have seen that girl up close. She must be lonely and unhappy. She doesn't seem to care about her looks at all. You'd almost think she was trying to make herself as unattractive as possible."

"She probably dresses up to go out."

Kathy shook her head. "I don't think she's had any fun for a long time."

There was a strangeness about Celeste Vickers that her

youthful widowhood did not explain, decided Kathy. The large eyes revealed depths of anxiety. Kathy had seen the weighted curve of the too-thin shoulders, before the girl sensed her approach and straightened in the saddle. Was her rudeness a proud shield? Did she desperately need friendship?

When Kathy spoke these thoughts aloud, Lucy promptly suggested a second invitation. "Make it lunch this time, then Celeste can't use that excuse about getting home before dark."

Kathy's blue eyes shone with inspiration. "Better still, I'll make it a luncheon party, a barbecue right here on the lawn, and invite everyone I've met so far."

"A wonderful idea," said Lucy. "I'll hate missing it."

"Silly, we'll have it on the Fourth of July. Bob will be here. Do you think Jim could possibly come too?"

Lucy sighed. "Not during boot-camp training. That's ten weeks."

"That would be, yes, the end of August. Right here and now, you and Jim are invited for the first week end he's free."

Lucy smiled. "That's something to look forward to. Don't think I feel too badly about having Jim away. Sure, I miss him, but we have to get used to being apart more often than we're together during these next few years."

"I suppose it will help both of you to be sure that you really love each other," said Kathy.

"I love him enough right now to want him to be the best sailor Uncle Sam ever had," declared her friend.

Thoughtfully quiet, the girls began tossing pebbles into the creek. Finally Kathy broke the silence.

"I would feel the same way about the boy I loved." She kept private her visions of Bob Lansford, his dark expressive eyes and teasing grin, the sure way he spun her onto the dance floor. "I would want him to try as hard as he could to accomplish something worthwhile, so he'd feel right about himself. So I would too. Self-respecting, you know. I'd want him to feel the same way about me. Love should be proud, shouldn't it?"

Lucy thrust out her hand. "I think so, fellow philosopher!"

"Before our beards get too long," said Kathy drily, "we had better plan the party. Let's have hamburgers and potato chips. Watermelon, if we can get it. Oh, it will probably be hot as blazes. Let's wear our white sleeveless blouses with white pleated skirts. Oooh," she chattered on, "maybe Miss Sands and Dr. Nilson will revive wedding plans as well as road plans. I hope so, don't you? Do you think Aunt Emily will come? If she does, should I warn Celeste when I invite her? Maybe I had better ask Mums about that."

# 6

WARNING CELESTE VICKERS PROVED UNNECESSARY. AUNT Emily declined the invitation.

"I always stay under cover on the Fourth of July," she said. "I love the spirit of the day, that's all. As a child, I was badly burned by firecrackers. My intense fear of explosions probably stems from that experience. Frankly, I always breathe easier when this particular holiday is over. Yes, Kathy dear, I know you're having a quiet picnic, and thank you for wanting me. However, I am staying home." Her refusal was firm and final.

Preparations began early on what promised to be a clear hot Fourth. Mrs. Parker covered the shaped hamburgers and put them in the refrigerator. "I'm glad Celeste is coming, even if she can only stay a while. She has to be home by three, she says. Perhaps she has more social life than we thought." She patted her daughter's shoulder. "We'll send some of your cake over to Aunt Emily later in the day. It looks lovely."

Kathy pressed the last cinnamon stick "firecracker" into the white frosting. "I'll take these off her piece."

"Yes, you had better, if she feels so strongly about such things," agreed her mother.

"Oh, her fear is real all right—to her. That's a phobia, isn't it?" Kathy licked some frosting off her finger. "I guess everyone is entitled to a queer idea or two."

"Especially old people," chimed in Lucy as she struggled with the stubborn top of a pickle jar.

"That's nice to hear," said Mrs. Parker. "Respecting each other's quirks is hard sometimes."

"Such as Celeste's haircut," Kathy suggested, wrinkling her nose. "Or our lady professor's unfeminine independence. Right, Lucy?"

"Yes," said her friend. "I, for one," she added, putting down the pickle jar and folding her arms, "am willing to admit there are some jobs a man can do better. But do you know, Mrs. Parker, that when the doctor stopped at the library yesterday Miss Sands insisted on uncrating the new encyclopedias all by herself. 'A labor of love' she called it. He couldn't get the hammer away from her."

"Then your matchmaking, or rather, rematchmaking, isn't going so well," said Mrs. Parker, who now knew about the broken engagement. "I don't—no, I won't say it." She smiled a small nostalgic smile. "Such romantic schemes are young girls' quirks. I remember and understand."

Kathy laughed. "I'd say the hardest quirk to understand is no quirk. I mean Guy Weighlund. He's so—so placid, and life is so exciting!"

"Particularly when a certain somebody is expected any moment," said Lucy slyly. "Umm, and here he is now. It

couldn't be anyone else," she added, as screeching wheels sent a drift of dust through the kitchen window.

"Bob!" cried Kathy. She whipped off her apron and stole a quick glance in the mirror over the sink. The new bang swept softly over her forehead and, with her hair grown longer, she had been able to pin curl the back into ringlets. A tan always made her few freckles unnoticeable. Thank goodness! She must look just right today.

After Bob was gone she would relive their hours together. She always did. It was like leafing through a snapshot album, except that the images in her mind had a habit of changing with each review. Unpleasant scenes disappeared and wonderful ones enlarged themselves way beyond life-size. These mind snapshots projected into the future too, envisioning marvelous "next times" for her and Bob, when they would suddenly find themselves able to talk their hearts out as people in love should.

But now, as always, the actual moment of seeing him left her tongue-tied. Confident as ever, he stepped through the kitchen door. He threw his plaid cap onto a chair and bowed. Lean, tanned, his grin more carefree than ever, he greeted first Mrs. Parker and then the girls.

"See what Daddy gave his little boy for graduation?" Bob snapped his fingers toward the small red car parked outside.

"Very cute," said Lucy. "That's one of those foreign cars with the motor in the back, isn't it?"

"You bet. Come on. I'll show you."

Mrs. Parker and the girls followed Bob outside.

"See? Here in front is the trunk," said Bob lifting the hood. He bent and patted a big square package inside. "This is for later. Five-inch salutes, ten-inch salutes, Roman candles, rockets, the works. Hah! Fireworks!"

"Well, I'm afraid they'll have to stay there, Bob. I'm sorry," said Mrs. Parker. She explained about Aunt Emily's intense fear.

Bob's underlip shot out. "That spoils everything. Why not pretend we forgot, or just ignore her? After all, this is your property."

"Oh, but we like Aunt Emily." Kathy hastily found her voice. Both her mother and Lucy looked so disapproving she had to say something. Later she would have to explain that Bob didn't mean to sound callous. Deftly she changed the subject. "Your car is simply adorable. I love it."

Bob brightened. "Want a ride?"

"Oh, yes," said Kathy, "but I want to show you the house and the new shop first."

Bob shrugged. "Okay. I've got a letter to deliver to your father anyway."

After a tour of the cottage and a word with Mr. Parker at the carriage house, Mrs. Parker suggested cookies and milk. While Bob answered polite questions about his family, Kathy snatched the opportunity at last really to look at him. He was even handsomer than she had remembered. Lost in a daydream, she heard only the sureness in his deep voice until Lucy's look of surprise made her listen to his words.

"That's right. I'm not going to Upstate University after

all," Bob was saying. "My Dad and I were up there yesterday. We thought the campus looked pretty sad, and it's not rated nearly as high as Pensington. That's where I've decided to go."

"You mean Upstate's tuition isn't nearly as high," said Lucy. "Don't run it down because you weren't accepted. That's what happened, isn't it? That letter to the dean didn't work, and your dad had to move fast and pay a lot to get you in somewhere else!"

"So what?" retorted Bob. He flipped up both hands. "The result is the same. I'm going to college, just like you and Kath."

Lucy's indignation increased. "Then you believe in any means to an end? That's what you're saying!"

Bob ignored her and turned to Kathy. "Pensington is only a few miles from Upstate. You are hereby invited to our biggest football game. Leave your self-righteous girl friend behind, please!"

Before Kathy could answer, Mrs. Parker broke in rather anxiously. "Here now, let's each take over a job and get this party started. Lucy, you can fold these napkins. Bob, will you take this charcoal out to the barbecue? Then, suppose you and Kathy try out the new car by going over to Clovedale to pick up Celeste."

"Does she expect to be picked up?" asked Kathy, surprised that the fiercely proud girl had accepted such an offer.

"No, I guess not, but I think it would be nice," said her mother insistently.

"Oh, yes, then she won't have to ride over in this heat," Kathy quickly agreed. Caught up in a mixture of disappointment and elation—Bob and she wouldn't be going to the same college, but the football date meant he planned to see her, anyway—Kathy had at first missed her mother's intention. Now she understood. Mums wanted to keep Bob and Lucy apart until the others arrived. Good manners would prevent them from airing their differences once the festivities started. Oh, she thought, with sudden exasperation, her best friend made her mad sometimes. Because Lucy was a year older she handed out opinions with the authority of a black-robed jurist. No one was always right, even at eighteen, and the day would come when Lucy would have to admit it.

After layering the pit with charcoal and getting out the tongs and asbestos gloves, Kathy and Bob jackknifed themselves inside the little car. While he warmed the motor, she gave him directions to Clovedale.

"Fifteen miles? Through three hick towns and over two bridges?" Bob grinned and smacked his jaw. "I thought you said this Clovedale was only about two miles away, Kath."

"As the crow flies it is." Kathy giggled when Bob flapped his arms like wings. "Or if we used the short cut." She explained the trouble her father had run into due to Aunt Emily's road restrictions. "She wants to keep Circle's End as it was in the past, and I don't want to risk upsetting her today. First, because she has such a phobia about the Fourth. And second, because Dad is going to have to ask

her to lift her restrictions temporarily so he can fulfill his first contract. We'd better take the long way round, Bob."

"What for?" Bob sped past the carriage house. At the shale-brick road he turned right. The car shot beneath the porte-cochere of Aunt Emily's big house like a crimson bullet and headed for Clovedale. "This isn't a commercial vehicle, so your Aunt Emily can't object," he said finally, cutting his speed. "If I were your father I'd just use her old road. How would she know whether he was off on business or pleasure?"

"If she saw his car going back and forth too often, she'd suspect. She could have his car stopped and inspected any time. Oh, why bother discussing that? Dad doesn't want any hard feelings. He gave his word he wouldn't use her road commercially without her permission."

Bob winked. "Well, anyway, your dad won't have to worry about any old road after he reads that letter I gave him."

"What do you mean?" Kathy couldn't tell whether he was only teasing.

"Never mind. You'll find out," he said. "Say, you didn't give me an answer about that football game. Is it a date?"

"It is. Word of honor," said Kathy, happily assured that he hadn't been teasing about that.

Bob nodded. "Good. Now where does this Celeste live?"

"The office file says Two High Street. If we can't find it, we'll ask. Even though our young Mrs. Vickers is quite antisocial, someone's bound to know her."

Bob's brows arched quizzically. "She's a Vickers, too?"

Kathy explained the relationship of the two Mrs. Vickers and the wall of silence between them. "Apparently old Mrs. Vickers never approved of her grandson's marriage and she's never recovered from the shock of his death two years ago. All she has now is Circle's End. That's why she's so determined to preserve it, I guess."

"This Aunt Emily sounds pretty narrow-minded," exclaimed Bob, "living in the past like that!"

"I felt a little that way too," admitted Kathy, "until I saw her miniature museum."

As she described Aunt Emily's treasures, she felt a warmth steal over her. Was this one of those "next times" she so dreamed about? Here she was about to put into words, for Bob, the new awareness that Aunt Emily's keepsakes had aroused, an awareness she had been shy about discussing with anyone as yet. How would she say it? I realized for the first time how much we owe the people who lived before us, or I felt an obligation to make my life as worthwhile as the best of theirs? Though, really, it had been a deeper feeling. A blend of admiration, gratitude, and love, yes, a certain kind of love, for those long-ago people.

"Bob," she began, "after seeing all those things I felt—" A side glance told her Bob wasn't listening. Nor had he been. He had been twisting and turning the radio dials.

"These darn mountains!" He clicked the sound off. "Nothing but static."

Kathy felt like the balloon clown she had once had. A breeze had bounced him against a splinter on her toy box and in a second his buoyant spirit had become a crinkled

heap. Fortunately, Kathy had human hope to sustain her. Soon she was telling herself, "Wait until next time."

"So this is Clovedale!" Bob braked the car and pushed back his cap. "Hey, Bud," he called to an elderly man across the street. "Where's High Street?"

After the man obliged with detailed directions, Kathy said bluntly, "You could have called him *Mister* and said *please* and *thank you* too, Bob." This time she couldn't blame Lucy for putting Bob in the wrong. He was wrong, she had to admit. Not that Bob was really rude, just thoughtless about some things.

"What's the dif?" he retorted breezily. "I'll never see him again."

Kathy remained silent as they drove along the tree-lined streets, desperately trying to quell some rising doubts. By the time they pulled up in front of 2 High Street, the little car seemed suffocating. She was glad to get out.

White paint peeled from the three-story house with its FURNISHED ROOMS sign over the entrance, but the windows shone. The yard was carefully tended too. As Kathy went up the walk a woman came around from the back. A little girl toddled beside her.

The woman announced herself as the landlady. When Kathy asked for Mrs. Vickers she smiled broadly.

"At last! Our sad young widow has callers. Why don't you wait in the parlor too? Celeste will be right down. Come on, Joanie," she said to the baby girl, "we'll go find the ball."

Inside, dark-green shades were drawn against the soaring

sun. Blinking at the abrupt change, Kathy sensed another presence as she groped her way into the parlor.

"Why, Dr. Nilson!" she exclaimed when the shadowy figure became clear. "I didn't know you were picking up Celeste."

"I didn't expect to," said the big man, somewhat abashed. "I had a house call near by and—" he floundered. "I'm afraid my appearance has disturbed young Mrs. Vickers. That was farthest from my intention. When I met her last week at your father's shop I suspected she needed help badly and was too proud to ask for it." His hands clenched. "Well, I've proved myself right, but I may have brought about a further withdrawal on Celeste's part."

While Kathy listened, a part of her mind filled with puzzle pieces that refused to fall into place. How did Celeste need help? Didn't the doctor's interest seem more than professional? How could it be, when he was in love with Miss Sands?

"So you see, Kathy," Dr. Nilson was earnestly adding, "it will be better if you leave before Celeste comes down. She'll think we've conspired to drag her out of her shell. I'm not sure whether I can persuade her to go to the barbecue now. I'll do my best."

"All right," said Kathy backing out, still confused but more than willing to cooperate. There was no mistaking the doctor's sincerity.

Bob impatiently raced the motor when Kathy explained that Celeste already had a ride. "You know, Kath," he said, "this place is so quiet. What say we touch off some

of those firecrackers up front before we leave and liven things up?"

His smile was so engaging Kathy couldn't help smiling back. "No! That's what I say." She shook her finger. "And don't you dare light even one at Circle's End. That would start a chain reaction. Aunt Emily would collapse. Then Dad couldn't ask to use her road temporarily. Then he'd lose his first contract and the chance of another bigger one." She tapped his shoulder playfully. "With the business ruined before it started I wouldn't be able to go to college in the fall. All because of one firecracker!"

"Pooh, your dad could have his pick of jobs in any big engineering firm. Then you could live in Floral City again. Wouldn't you rather?"

"Yes," said Kathy, "I guess so, but Dad happens to want his own business. Now that he's seen how badly Vickers Circle needs industry, how much they're counting on him to help revive the town, why he's more anxious than ever to make good!"

Bob shot her a sidelong glance as they drove along. He too seemed serious. "My dad has been assigned to supervise a big project in that company he joined. He's anxious to make good too. You might say my college education depended on it. Now, your father is tops in electronics and my dad needs him—or else! That's what that letter was about."

Then Bob hadn't been teasing about the letter's importance, thought Kathy. Would Dad consider leaving the Circle now? She was amazed to discover that she didn't

want him to. Though she had so readily told Bob she would prefer living in Floral City again, it wasn't completely true. She would always love Long Island, but her loyalty had divided, three ways, really, for a part of it lay waiting on the campus of Upstate University.

Bob went on thoughtfully: "In fact, Dad told me to use all the powers at my command to get Mr. Parker to accept his offer, and I'm thinking maybe I will."

"I'm sure my father is determined to stay in Vickers Circle, Bob." She waved her hand. "However, ours is a free country. That's what we're celebrating today. I certainly won't object if you use your floweriest oratory in your father's behalf."

"I'm not much of an orator," said Bob as they swung up to the kitchen door. The teasing lilt was back in his voice. "More a man of action."

"Act then!" Kathy jumped from the car. Bob was fun when it came to parrying words, she thought. In fact, he was wonderful. She was, she must be in love with him. Why had that finger of doubt touched her a while ago? She found the reason impossible to recall as they raced toward the barbecue pit.

Guy Weighlund lay curled in the hammock alternating between puffing on his pipe and smiling contentedly at his wife. She, in turn, alternated between deploring and praising his extreme serenity while she helped Kathy's mother set the picnic table.

"Guy is slow but very reliable," said the wiry Mrs. Weighlund, lining up knives and forks with quick, machinelike

precision. "He would have written to his cousin in Floral City about that release for the new road eventually, but I'm glad you mentioned it, Mrs. Parker. I'll see to it tomorrow. In fact, I'll telephone Guy's cousin this evening." She shook her head. "Slow motion runs in Guy's family. If you've ever met his father, the postmaster, you know what I mean. Now my family's a bundle of nerves. Always on edge. Everything rush, rush all the time. That's what first attracted me to Guy. He was so restful to be with. He still is. I wouldn't change him if I could."

The Weighlunds were nice. They understood each other, Kathy decided. She caught the special look they exchanged. Often she had observed this same kind of look pass between people in love, as though they saw each other in some unique light and needed no words to convey understanding. While she mulled over this human mystery, Dr. Nilson and Celeste arrived. Kathy was astonished when a similar look passed between them as they came up the path. Miss Sands, approaching from the other side of the cottage after parking her car in back, had noticed too. Kathy saw both surprise and hurt dart into the professor's eyes.

Lucy had been merrily shrieking exaggerated compliments at Mr. Parker for opening the stubborn pickle jar with one twist. Suddenly she became still. Kathy knew that she too had perceived this unexpected development in their rematchmaking scheme. All former annoyance with her friend vanished as Kathy heard her plunge Miss Sands into an involved discussion of Upstate's curriculum. Kind and clever Lucy, thought Kathy. By the time Dr. Nilson reached

the picnic table, Celeste's thin arm still tucked protectively under his strong one, Miss Sands was her composed self once more.

Ten paper plates were piled high with charcoal-crusted hamburgers, potato salad and chips, deviled eggs, warm buttered rolls, and "Lucy's reluctant pickles," as Kathy's father named the succulent cucumber spears.

Capturing every breeze with their green-needled fans, the surrounding pines kept the picnic spot a cool oasis. Appetites were sharp. *Bon mots* were plentiful. Everyone seemed to be enjoying everything. Even Celeste made a remark or two.

After the plates were clean, and some filled and cleaned again, Mrs. Parker suggested a game of croquet, "to make room for Kathy's cake and some watermelon and coffee." Bob, Kathy noticed, took this opportunity to draw her father aside. During her trips between the table and the kitchen she observed their discussion deepening. As she had suspected he would, her father was refusing to consider Mr. Lansford's proposition. Patiently but persistently he kept shaking his head.

When Kathy came out again with the cake forks, her father was watching the croquet players. Bob was nowhere in sight. Perhaps he had asked Mums if he could telephone his father from her bedroom extension. Mr. Lansford would be disappointed, thought Kathy with some satisfaction. He must have counted heavily on Dad's expert knowledge to make that big project a success.

Kathy thought no more about business problems or Bob's

whereabouts when she saw Miss Sands standing beside the barbecue, folding and refolding the asbestos gloves. She was so obviously staying clear of the doctor and Celeste who now played partners against the Weighlunds. Slightly irritated by the slim teacher's meek acceptance of the situation, Kathy said, "Come on, let's go see who's winning."

Miss Sands threw down the gloves. "No, I don't think so. I heard you mention taking some cake over to your Aunt Emily. I'll go with you. I haven't called on Mrs. Vickers in weeks." The dimple appeared in her cheek. "That game over there will surely last the twenty minutes a proper social call takes. Why don't we go now?"

Kathy agreed and after the few minutes it took to cut and wrap a generous slice of cake, stripped of cinnamon stick "firecrackers," they were on their way.

Just as they reached Aunt Emily's front steps an ear-splitting blast ripped the quiet afternoon. Miss Sands looked up at the clear blue sky.

"That can't be storm warnings," she said. Then she smiled. "I forgot. It's the Fourth of July. Someone is shooting firecrackers back at the carriage house. See the smoke curling around the roof?"

One blast followed another in rapid succession. Kathy clapped her hands to her ears when the short sharp sounds culminated in a rolling thunderous explosion. She looked back. Smoke momentarily blacked out the carriage house and part of the cottage too.

"It's Bob! How could he!" she cried.

He had vowed to use every power at his command to per-

suade her father to help his. Is this what he had meant?

"Oh, how could he!" she cried again.

There must be some explanation. Bob wouldn't deliberately ruin her father's hope of using Aunt Emily's road just to gain his own selfish ends. But Lucy's accusation of the morning ran through her mind—any means to an end, any means—

"No, no!" she said aloud.

"Whatever is the matter?" said Miss Sands. "Surely you aren't afraid of firecrackers?"

"No, but Aunt Emily is, and oh—" Kathy rushed through an explanation.

The slender woman patted her arm. "I'm sure your friend, Bob, has no malicious intent. Moreover, I'm positive Mrs. Vickers isn't as terrified of fireworks as all that."

"She'll think Dad is manufacturing atom bombs or something!" Kathy cried.

"Then we'll go in right now and reassure her," said Miss Sands. "Mrs. Vickers!" she called when no one answered her knock. "She must be in her garden."

Kathy's neck muscles tightened. She knew with an awful certainty that Aunt Emily was somewhere in the house paralyzed by fear. Perhaps dead! People, especially old people, did die of fright.

"Miss Sands, hurry! We've got to go in and help her!" Kathy wrenched open the screen door and ran down the dim cool hall sobbing.

# 7

SQUASHED BY HER TENSE FINGERS, THE WHITE-FROSTED CAKE was a carefully wrapped ruin by the time Kathy reached the drawing-room doorway calling, "Aunt Emily!" She turned to Miss Sands who followed at a slower pace. "She isn't here. Shall we go upstairs?"

"No, I'm sure you're unduly alarmed." The professor looked around calmly. Then she sucked in her breath and hurried back across the hall with Kathy at her heels.

Aunt Emily lay slumped in an armchair with one hand on the telephone table.

"Poor soul, she must have tried to call for help. Oh, Kathy, you were right." Miss Sands touched the still shoulder and bent closer. "She's only fainted, or had some sort of spell. Dial the cottage and tell Dr. Nilson to come right away."

When the doctor arrived, Celeste Vickers pushed past him and reached the pitifully inert figure first. He brusquely ordered her aside.

"Stop crying, and stop trying to blame yourself for this too." He opened his bag and made a brief examination.

"Celeste," he said without looking up, "go out in the kitchen and boil some water."

After the girl ran off he motioned to Miss Sands. "I don't think it's serious, Ellie. She's coming round already. You and Kathy can help me move her to the sofa inside."

While they were answering Aunt Emily's first wavering questions, Celeste reappeared. With a fresh outburst of tears she ran and threw herself into a kneeling position beside the sofa.

"Grammer," she cried, "are you all right?"

A gentle half-smile played about the old lady's lips. "Grammer," she said softly. "Johnny always called me Grammer." She reached out and gave the girl's ragged auburn hair a pat, then folded her hands and closed her eyes.

Celeste jumped up, her enormous eyes red-rimmed and swollen. "She's dead," she whispered hoarsely. "Just like Johnny and it's all my fault."

Dr. Nilson firmly guided the overwrought girl out into the hall. "You must get that macabre idea out of your head." Kathy heard him say. "Johnny's death was an accident, and right now his grandmother is very much alive—and happy. You made her happy, Celeste. That's why she dropped off to sleep so peacefully." Kathy heard the doctor grumble uncomfortably. "You could make her happier still. Yes, you know what I mean, and lose that phantom guilt of yours at the same time. Now go back to the Parkers and wait. I'll get you home by three o'clock as I promised."

Dr. Nilson and Celeste shared some secret, Kathy real-

ized. His appearance at 2 High Street this morning must have taken Celeste so by surprise she had poured out her troubles. Apparently his sympathetic nature, his need to help people, had responded at once.

Not she alone had recognized the more-than-professional concern in Dr. Nilson's voice, Kathy knew. Miss Sands' classic features were taut and when the doctor returned to the drawing room after using the hall telephone, she remained awkwardly silent.

Kathy said the first thing she could think of. "What about that boiled water out in the kitchen?"

The doctor laughed. "When the practical nurse I've called arrives, she can make herself a pot of tea. I assigned that task to Celeste to keep her busy and out of my way." He smiled at Miss Sands. "Remember, Ellie, when I came home after premed and told you about the cure-all for the patient's hysterical relatives?"

"Yes, Brandley, I remember," said the professor, averting her glance.

He began packing his bag. "You gals go back to the party. I'll wait for the nurse." He pointed at Kathy. "You have my sympathy, young lady. You are going to have quite a time helping your friend, Bob, excuse himself. Your mother says she specifically told him that fireworks were forbidden and why."

"I won't help him!" Kathy jutted her chin. "There's no excuse! I never want to see him again!"

You don't mean that, you don't, a small voice insisted as she and Miss Sands walked back to the cottage. Of course

you want to see Bob again. Bob Lansford—remember—you're in love with him. He must have some explanation. He simply must.

Flies had found Kathy's gala holiday cake. The cut watermelon looked warm and spongy, and cold coffee ringed the glass carafe in the center of the table. Lucy, Mrs. Weighlund, and Celeste were quietly removing the ruined remains while Guy raked up around the barbecue pit. After being reassured about Aunt Emily's condition they went on with their work and Mr. and Mrs. Parker sank back into their chairs. Her parents seemed to have aged ten years.

"Where's Bob?" asked Kathy belligerently, to relieve the strangling sensation she felt.

"Round back, getting ready to leave," said her father. "I've accepted his apology. Don't say any more."

"No, don't," said her mother wearily. "I'm afraid I lost my temper with him. I don't suppose he meant any harm."

Miss Sands spoke up. "That's what I told Kathy. Now I'm beginning to realize the harm that's been done, whether by design or not." The professor, thought Kathy, seemed to imply that she was beginning to wonder about Bob's intentions too, but she added only, "This one thoughtless act could have serious consequences aside from poor Mrs. Vickers' spell."

"I know," said Mr. Parker. "Bothering Aunt Emily about my transportation problem is out of the question now. I wouldn't think of upsetting her." He took off his glasses and rubbed his eyes.

Miss Sands sat down opposite him. "Mr. Parker, you

heard at the last committee meeting how other companies are discussing moving branch offices and plants to the Circle if the new road goes through. And it won't without you. Your business is our spearhead."

He resettled his glasses and smiled. "Now, Miss Sands, I didn't say I was giving up."

Mrs. Parker straightened. "Matt will find some solution. He always does."

Kathy ran off blindly. Bob had to do more than apologize for this! He had to explain. However, when she saw him perched so dejectedly on the back bumper of his little red car, anger died. She knew the hollow loneliness that followed a bad mistake. Being sorry and apologizing didn't help much, not at first.

"I guess you must be feeling pretty terrible," she said softly.

His smile was wan. "You bet. The fireworks didn't work. Your dad won't change his mind."

Kathy stared at him. Was Bob admitting that he had set off those explosions to start the very chain reaction she had predicted?

"You look funny, Kath," he said. "I guess you're disappointed too, about not going back to live in Floral City, I mean. Well, I tried." He waved his hand magnanimously. "I wasn't thinking only of the Lansfords. I wanted to help you get what you wanted too."

When Kathy cried out, he added hurriedly: "Don't worry. I didn't confess my twofold plot to your folks. I pretended to think your Aunt Emily's phobia was just a joke,

and I said I was sorry. I sure am sorry it didn't work. Your father would have thanked me later for giving him a good excuse to get out of this hick town."

"Bob. Oh, Bob!" Kathy turned and ran for the kitchen door.

"Good-by, Kath. I'll write," she heard him say as she sped up the stairs.

Until his car roared off, she sat on a middle step, holding onto a spindle with both hands. While Bob recounted his plot that failed, the mask of some spoiled and selfish stranger had seemed to hide his face. Or had she glimpsed the real Bob, unmasked? It didn't bear thinking about. She couldn't—not now.

Kathy went out front again. The Weighlunds were leaving. Dr. Nilson had returned. His obvious concern for Celeste seemed to make Miss Sands uncomfortable. She insisted that Mrs. Parker let her "tackle the mess in the kitchen."

Lucy sauntered over. She rolled her dark eyes toward Celeste and whispered, "Our scheme has hit a snag." Then she leaned closer to Kathy. "Hey! Don't cry here. Come on. Help me pack."

Upstairs, Kathy plaintively summed up the day's disasters. "Our matchmaking flopped. Dad's business problems are worse than ever. No one got a chance even to taste my beautiful cake. And Bob! Oh, Lucy, you were—"She almost said, "You were right about Bob," but discovered herself unwilling to admit that, yet.

Lucy ignored the unfinished sentence. "For goodness'

sake, we all make mistakes. Bob apologized, and your Aunt Emily is recovering." She snapped her suitcase shut and sat down on the bed. "Everything will turn out all right. In fact, one thing already has. Do you realize the last wall has tumbled down? The one between Celeste and Mrs. Vickers. That girl looked almost happy when she came back and told us."

Kathy picked at the rose-sprigged spread. "That's true, but—"

"Every cloud has a silver lining," Lucy broke in cheerfully.

Kathy groaned in mock anguish. "Be more original, can't you?"

"I needn't be. I'm going to be a dietician, not a journalist like you. Tell you what, I'll count your calories while you improve my prose." Lucy threw her arms wide. "Whee! What a team we'll make at Upstate this fall."

Kathy couldn't help laughing.

"Don't forget to use your talent this summer," her friend went on. "I expect lots and lots of letters. Never mind the fancy phrases either. Give me facts! Especially about Miss Sands and the doctor. Want to bet that love triumphs?"

Though she was sorry to see Lucy leave, Kathy's spirits remained on the upswing to and from the railroad station. Letters would help fill the gap between now and Lucy's late August visit with Jim. Mrs. Parker's reminder that this was county fair time started the girls chattering. They parted, bubbling over with happy plans.

While her mother garaged the car, Kathy joined Miss

Sands, her father, and Dr. Nilson, who had returned after taking Celeste home. Apparently, though, the young widow remained in his thoughts. He kept interspersing the general conversation with comments about her: "Celeste tells me she enjoys her work here"—"That young Mrs. Vickers has had a difficult time"—"Celeste needs friends badly."

Right now Miss Sands looked badly in need of friends too, thought Kathy irritably. Her face was white, her smile forced. When the telephone rang, Kathy was glad to leave the scene.

It was Mrs. Weighlund with disappointing news. "I called our cousin's number in Floral City but a stranger answered. He said the Long Island Guy sold his house and left town over a year ago. I found out too that his share of the taxes on our land has been prepaid for the next two years. He might have left the country. Maybe he joined the service. Tell your father I'm terribly sorry, though I'm sure there must be some legal way to get around this."

Miss Sands sighed when Kathy relayed the message. "There is a way, of course, but it could take years."

Mr. Parker rubbed his chin. The doctor let his big hands dangle between his knees. Kathy knew this was a serious setback. Everything was going wrong. Disturbing thoughts about Bob's behavior began crowding back into her mind. What a dreadful day it had been!

When her mother rejoined them and met this new disappointment with one of her optimistic remarks, Kathy retorted, "Mother, please! Don't try to gloss over the ruins." She went to the barbeque pit and began poking at the dead

ash with a stick. If Mums said again, "There's an answer to every problem," she thought she would scream!

"There's a remnant of hope among the worst ruins, Kathy," said Miss Sands, moving to her side. "Remember the story of the phoenix rising from the ashes, renewed."

Dr. Nilson snorted. "Ellie, let's have no mythology today. Literature won't help here."

"My theory is that literature can help one keep perspective during troublesome times," retorted the professor.

What's this? thought Kathy. Their annoyance with each other seemed excessive.

Said the doctor to no one in particular, "Ellie loves books." The crease of his heavy brow canceled his polite smile.

Curiosity replaced Kathy's gloom. Why were *books* such a sore point between these two? Miss Sands began tugging at one of her big earrings as though the word still echoed painfully.

"Then you haven't forgiven me, Brandley. I thought—" The professor turned to Mrs. Parker. "I must be going. Thank you for a lovely time." After good-bys all around she left.

The doctor looked embarrassed. "I didn't intend adding to the day's tribulations. I'm sorry, Mr. and Mrs. Parker, Kathy. I was trying to make Ellie see that you needed more realistic help, a down-to-earth method of getting those finished amplifiers to the station without violating Mrs. Vickers' property rights. We're all agreed she must have peace of mind right now. Her recovery depends on it. On the

other hand, the Circle's recovery depends on fulfilling that contract. As I was saying to Celeste—" Dr. Nilson stopped short when Kathy put out her hand. "What? Have I said something wrong again?"

"No! Oh, no!" said Kathy. She could feel her breath quickening. "You said 'Celeste' and I thought, 'Celeste and her horse!' Dad, don't you see? Get me a horse and you'll have that transportation. A pony express!"

Three pairs of eyes focused upon her. The silence lengthened, then her father stood up and smacked his palms together. "Why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" said her mother, laughing. "Wasn't I right? Don't I always say—"

"Yes, Mums," said Kathy, laughing too, and bending her face for a kiss. "You were right and so was Miss Sands. The phoenix does still rise from the ashes."

She saw the doctor wince and wondered again how "books" could have laid the foundation for the wall between him and Miss Sands. She was thankful for the diversion this mystery offered. It delayed reviewing her ruined snapshot memories of Bob.

# 8

DOMINO, WITH HIS BLACK MASK, AT FIRST REMINDED KATHY of that last strange impression she had had of Bob Lansford, but the big spotted horse soon made her forget this unpleasant association. He was a charming bag of tricks. Each morning he whinnied for her attention, pulled her handkerchief out of her pocket, or her shirt out of her jeans, when she bent to get his water pail, and then slapped affectionately at her arm with his pink moist tongue as though to beg indulgence for his antics.

"Within a week he's become an established personality here at Circle's End," Kathy said to Celeste one morning, as the young widow left her chestnut mare to pat Domino's nose. "Though I don't suppose you can really say an animal has personality."

The thin girl smiled. "He doesn't seem to know or care that he's only a horse, does he? I wish I could be so happily unconcerned about my proper role in life." She took a quick backward step. "Here I am thinking out loud again, Kathy. Don't mind me. Shall we start over to Clovedale? There's a shipment of tubes due."

"Dad doesn't expect you to do pony express work too."

"I want to. For the first time in two years I feel part of something. Fulfilling this contract on time has become a personal goal to me, or an anchor. Well, never mind that. My real reason for wanting to go with you today is to scare off our small obnoxious friend, Hank. He jumped out at me this morning again and my poor mare reared in fright. Good thing I didn't have a saddlebag full of tubes then. We tried being nice, Kathy—let him pat the horses and gave him a ride—yet he keeps tormenting us. What ails that child?"

"A strong overdose of mother love," commented Kathy, heading for the tack room. She had already told Celeste about her first encounter with Hank in Dr. Nilson's office. "That was the doctor's diagnosis."

Celeste frowned. "Bran—I mean, the doctor said that?"

Kathy eased the bit into Domino's mouth. More than once, during the past few days, she had noticed the girl's large eyes shine at the sound of Dr. Nilson's name. Now they were clouded. Though Kathy still rooted for Miss Sands to rewin the doctor, she had no wish to make him seem unsympathetic to his new admirer.

"Oh, I guess he meant the overprotective kind of mother love," she explained.

"Mother love should be protective," said Celeste rather heatedly. "I know what he meant though," she added, her voice dropping leadenly. "A mother can shut out the world with her love, especially if the child is all she has. Then love, if you can still call it that, becomes a cage."

"Our Hank certainly acts as though he's trying to escape from something," said Kathy lightly and with some impa-

tience. She hoped this premature concern with mother love would fade on the way to the station, that Celeste would tell more about her romantic love for the late Johnny Vickers.

Throughout the past week, Celeste had been willing, sometimes even anxious, to talk about her tragic past. Had Dr. Nilson so prescribed? If he had, his cure was proving effective. Tension had left the girl's thin face, making it appear rounder, softer. She now wore gay-colored blouses and her wavy cap of auburn hair proclaimed a normal feminine dexterity with pins and comb. Normal feminine curiosity had returned too. Without seeming to pry, Celeste had encouraged Kathy to talk about Bob.

Kathy had told more than she realized about the mixed emotions Bob Lansford aroused, and been helped more than she knew by her riding companion's quiet listening. No longer did she avoid reviewing those Fourth of July memories. She found, as always before, some clear bright images to cherish provided she trimmed off the tattered edges. The ride in the little red car was perfect, provided she forgot Bob's arrogance toward the elderly man who had given them directions. And so was the fun they had had charcoal-broiling the hamburgers, if she forgot what happened later.

Oddly though, upon projecting her mind snapshots into the future she now, more often than not, "saw" a faceless silhouette in place of Bob Lansford. Was the knowing part of her mind, the part that could not "forget," that insisted on facing things "head on," trying to point out the truth?

Had Bob's selfish, spoiled expression been his own, not the mask of some stranger? Could the real stranger be the boy her illusions had made Bob seem to be?

These vexing questions seemed less urgent in view of Celeste's slowly unfolding story. Kathy's sympathy grew along with her interest. With ill-concealed sorrow the young widow had told of her elopement with Johnny Vickers two and a half years ago, of the impulsive dash down South between winter and spring terms, and the cold, flat, two-minute marriage service in a small town justice's dingy dining room. Celeste had told too about her parents' separation years before.

"My mother's annual letter always has a different postmark," she said. "My father travels too, selling. My only roots are here, where Johnny grew up. His father was killed in the war and his mother died when he was only two. Neither of us had a normal childhood. Maybe that's why we were so afraid of losing each other, why we—why *I* let fear spoil our love."

Her lips had trembled for a moment. "Anyway, I lived near the college we both went to for a while after Johnny's death, but I kept remembering how things could have been if I had listened to Grammer Vickers. If only I'd loved Johnny enough to chance losing him!"

This last remark had been made two days ago, and Kathy had been cogitating ever since. She knew Lucy must be pondering it too by now. "What do you suppose she meant?" Kathy had written to her friend.

Previously Kathy had detailed as best she could the deep-

seated guilt feelings Celeste had about her young husband's death.

*It seems Johnny's grandmother disapproved of the marriage* [she wrote] *but probably would have accepted it if Johnny hadn't acted so defiantly and said so many mean things. Fright and worry over the new responsibilities he faced made him act this way, Celeste says. Then the break with his grandmother that followed preyed on Johnny's mind.* [Kathy had gone on to explain to her friend.] *He began failing, one course after another. Toward the end of the term he took to driving miles, as though someone were chasing him. During the last of these wild rides a blowout sent him careening off a bridge. He was killed instantly. If Celeste had remained firm that they wait to be married, none of this would have happened. At least, that's how she has built the case against herself. Aunt Emily might have felt that way too. She doesn't any more, I'm sure. Celeste visits the big house every day now. She's warming up, but still very secretive about something, and much she says puzzles me. For instance—*

Kathy had then written the young widow's comment on love for her friend's perusal. Now she hoped the morning's conversation would lead to a clarification.

Celeste, however, remained thoughtfully silent all the way to Clovedale.

Usually the railroad express clerk made merry over the girls' outdated mode of travel, warning them of gun-slinging cowboys and lurking Indian bands. Today his only greeting was a glum nod.

"Feeling low," he explained. "Hearing about a youngster getting hurt spoiled this pretty day for me."

Celeste slid from her mount and grasped the man's arm. "Who was hurt? A boy or girl? How old was the child?"

"I don't know, Miss. All I heard was that some little tyke had a bad bang on the head and was rushed off to the Clovedale clinic about an hour ago."

Frantically Celeste searched her pockets. "I've got to call my landlady."

"Here," said Kathy, handing her some change. Suddenly she knew Celeste's secret, the one Dr. Nilson had shared with the widow ever since the Fourth of July. Looking back, she wondered why she hadn't guessed before. She recalled so clearly now how that baby girl's hair had glistened auburn in the sunlight as she toddled beside Celeste's landlady. No wonder young Mrs. Vickers refused dinner invitations. She had to get back to her child.

So many things made sense now—her interest in mother love, and that remark of Dr. Nilson's a week ago about making Aunt Emily happier still and losing that phantom guilt about Johnny's death at the same time. How wise the doctor's advice was! No matter how much Aunt Emily regretted the hasty marriage, she could never regret having a great-grandchild to love. If she could only convince Celeste, thought Kathy, but she mustn't let on she knew.

Celeste glowed as she stepped from the telephone booth. "It's Hank, and he's not too badly hurt, my landlady says. I was so afraid—oh, Kathy, there's something I should have told you right from the start." She then told all about her

eighteen-month-old baby girl. "You see now why I had to come back here, to find roots for her. Yet I'm still afraid. I want to tell Grammer and—and I don't." Her head lifted. "She might think I want financial help for Joan Emily and myself."

"Joan Emily. Oh, it would make your Johnny's grandmother so happy to know she isn't the last of the Emilys after all." She told Celeste about the narrative poem Mrs. Vickers had lost all hope of ever passing on. "Tell her about the baby."

"I've tried," said Celeste, "but the words won't—" She put her hand to her mouth. "We should go and see about Hank. I feel guilty, being so happy that he was hurt and not my Joanie."

"Why feel guilty?" asked Kathy.

"It's become a habit. That's what Dr. Nilson says." Celeste lowered her glance. "I know he and Miss Sands were once engaged, and I know you and your friend brought them together again. I appreciate his friendship, but please don't think I'm trying to steal him away from the professor."

"Were Lucy and I so transparent?" Kathy blushed. "Getting back to Hank, let's go see him, not because of any guilt feelings, but because we'll honestly miss him during the next few days"—she laughed—"miss him like a raging toothache!"

At the clinic Hank's mother tearfully explained how some "big hulking boy" had hit Hank with a rock and then run off. She asked the girls to amuse her son while she conferred with the floor nurse about her darling's "pernickety" appetite.

"Who hit you, Hank?" asked Kathy, handing him the comic book she'd bought on the way.

He pouted a moment, then mumbled. "Nobuddy! I fell, running back to my hide-out after I scared her!" He pointed at Celeste. "Don't tell Mom, though, or she won't let me out any more."

"You fibber!" exclaimed Kathy, turning to conceal her smile. On the bedside table she saw an assortment of rocks, and she recalled her promise to send some of the area's specimens down to her prom escort in Floral City. "Did all these come out of your pockets, Hank?" She picked up a smooth cone-shaped one. "This looks like limestone."

"You can't have that one! Put it down, or I'll shoot!" Hank pulled a cap pistol out from beneath the bedclothes. Eyes narrowed, lips curled, the eight-year-old pixie face took on the shrewd expression of a robber baron driving a hard bargain. "Want to make a deal?"

"I'm listening." Kathy put her hands on her hips, doing her best to match Hank's excellent acting.

"One dollar for the lot." The boy attempted a growl and his thin voice squeaked. "All 'cept that one in yer hand. That's from my special hiding place, my lair, and I don't aim to part with it."

"Sold!" Kathy gave in to laughter at last.

On the way back, with the packaged tubes safely stowed in the saddlebags, Celeste reined her mare in closer to Domino and poked a finger at Kathy's bulging pocket. "Why in the world are you still carrying those rocks?"

"Hank did me a favor, unintentionally, of course." She

told about the promise to her former classmate. "I'll mail them off tomorrow."

"Do you always keep a promise?"

"I try to," said Kathy.

"Then promise not to tell anyone about my little girl. Not yet, not even your best friend, Lucy?"

"All right, I promise. Now, would you mind if I asked you about something you said the other day?" The auburn-haired girl shook her head and Kathy went on. "You said you should have loved Johnny enough to chance losing him. What did you mean?"

"Well—" The girl hesitated and studied the reins in her hands. "Well, almost any young man in love, any boy Johnny's age, is so—overpowered by his feelings that he can't think straight. I felt that way too sometimes, but only sometimes. That's why it was mostly my fault. Grammer blamed it on some of the movies, TV shows, ads, and songs today, and junky books and magazines. I don't know about that. Older people are always making remarks about 'this generation.' Before we were married, when Johnny used to bring me to visit Grammer here at Circle's End, I used to laugh and say, "Oh, Mrs. Vickers, we enjoy our generation as you did yours!' "

Kathy couldn't imagine this sober girl speaking up with such spirit, such bright confidence.

"You do hear and read so much about it, though. You get to think it alone matters." Celeste took a deep breath. "You know what I mean. Sex. Of course it is part of being in love."

Though Kathy appreciated the young widow's frankness, she saw how difficult it was for her. She broke in to stop her, but Celeste said, "Let me finish." She now seemed determined to make her companion understand, almost as though she hoped to earn back her happy confident outlook by helping someone younger.

"It is an important part," the widow went on, "worth keeping special, worth waiting for. But Johnny threatened never to see me again if I didn't marry him right away. I loved him so I gave in. I was afraid of losing him." Her voice did not waver. "I should have loved him enough to take that chance. If he really loved me, he would have come back to me eventually." She took another deep breath. "Our happiness was short-lived. I mean, it ended long before Johnny's death. I knew we weren't prepared for marriage. But, oh, it's terribly hard to remember what you know when elopement fever strikes."

"Can I tell that to Lucy?"

Celeste gave her an intent look. "You can tell it to anyone who will listen."

"Lucy will. She and Jim plan to wait three years before being formally engaged."

"I hope she lets nothing frighten her into changing her plans the way I did. Johnny was the victim of my fear. He'd be alive if—"

"If! If! Your husband's death was an accident!" Kathy cried. "If he had lived, you would probably have worked things out together and been happy again. Anyway, most

people would say you were the victim, left all alone with a child to raise."

"There are no ifs about Joan Emily," said Celeste. "I can't regret having her."

"Why don't you put the past where it belongs then, behind you?"

"Easier said than done," countered Celeste sharply, but she smiled. "You're finding it hard to put only one day behind you. Have you heard from Bob Lansford since the Fourth?"

"A short note, which I didn't answer. He wrote to my parents too, and apologized again." She brushed at her perspiring forehead. "I simply can't decide how I feel about Bob."

"You don't have to—yet. Oh, Kathy, the next few years can be such lovely growing ones for you. You've plenty of time for making serious decisions. Use all of it!"

# 9

MISS SANDS' ADVICE TEN DAYS LATER SEEMED CONTRADICTORY to Celeste's. "Have the courage to make a decision and stick to it, Kathy. I kept Brandley dangling about our wedding date. I couldn't decide whether or not to wait until I got my master's. When he asks me again, I won't hesitate.

"Our engagement was broken over such a trivial matter," she went on, keeping her eyes fixed on the road ahead. "It was my fault, but surely I should have another chance. I know I have a rival now in young Mrs. Vickers. I'm grateful to her in a way. She's sharpened my determination to win Brandley back."

Kath listened dreamily. The swift ribboning landscape was hypnotic. The soft, pale upholstery of the professor's car pampered her aching muscles delightfully. The pony express was successful. Mr. Parker had received a complaint about slow delivery, but they were catching up. By the end of August all the finished amplifiers should have reached the customer. A second, larger contract was the prize, well worth all the hot rides to Clovedale and back.

Kathy was glad, though, when her father insisted that she accept Miss Sands' invitation to drive up to the university

for the day. With the dream of attending so close at hand, it would be thrilling to roam Upstate's campus again. There had been changes since her sister's graduation—a new research building, more dormitories, and another wing on the library which was the reason for Miss Sands' midsummer visit. The professor was as animated as a girl en route to her first dance about seeing those countless new shelves filled with books. Kathy wondered if Dr. Nilson hadn't some grounds for annoyance. After all, people were more important than books. Yet Miss Sands planned to see her summer schoolteaching colleagues after she visited the library if there was time.

"There's one thing I must do," said Miss Sands, slowing the car for its sweep past Upstate's gates. "I must take you through the brand-new dormitory where you and your friend will be staying. There's still some decorating going on, so only faculty members may enter. I'll get a key and meet you in front of the chapel at three o'clock."

Kathy bounced. "That will be wonderful!"

Left on her own, Kathy roamed from the pillared College of Law to the newer Agricultural College with its sunken gardens and groves. She climbed high narrow steps to reach the hundred-year-old seminary, leaned over a stone balustrade for a view of the stadium, then snaked her way down a dirt path to get to the Fine Arts building. Did the bronze sea nymph, veiled by the fountain's glitter, still poise gracefully for the dive she would never complete? She did, Kathy looked up at her admiringly and with some envy. The sun was high and hot.

A brilliant streak of orange in a nearby hedge caught her eye. She investigated. A "frosh" cap! She brushed off some loose dirt and smoothed the ribbed seams with her finger. Some last year's freshman, after weeks of doffing this symbolic cap at every upper classman's command, had proudly tossed it away the day before Thanksgiving vacation when hazing ended.

Kathy sat on a bench, perched the cap on her head and pictured herself and Lucy, books under their arms, scurrying around the campus, giggling and trying to escape the call, "Hey, frosh!" There would be new responsibilities. No Mums to see she go to class on time. No Dad to help her with math. She dreamed away—of the new faces she would see here, of the teas and dances and football games. When she put the cap in her big white purse and looked at her watch it was almost three. No time for a Coke at the Varsity Sweet Shop before meeting Miss Sands. Oh, well, she thought, heading toward the chapel, it wouldn't be much fun going alone anyway.

After waiting in front of the chapel for half an hour, she began feeling conspicuous. Each time the gardener finished pruning another rose bush he seemed to give her a curious look, and summer students passing by stared at her, or seemed to. What was keeping Miss Sands? Had she misunderstood the professor? Had Miss Sands said she would get a key at the chapel and meet her at the new dormitory?

Another twenty minutes ticked away. When the gardener looked over again, she ran up to him and asked directions.

"Becker Hall, the new women's dormitory, is quite some

distance." He named the streets and turns to watch for in a deep gentle voice. "Is that what you've been looking for? Why didn't you speak up before?"

When she explained about meeting the assistant professor, the man's eyes sparkled. "I doubt you've misunderstood about the meeting place. I suspect Miss Sands has become engrossed in Plato's *Republic* or *Vanity Fair*"—he chuckled —"or it could be only the new telephone directory. It hardly matters to that young woman. She's in love with the printed word." He dropped his pruning shears and stretched out his hand to Kathy. "I'm the pastor here. Are you planning to study at Upstate?"

Kathy shook hands, introduced herself, and told of her hopes for the coming fall.

"Miss Parker—no, I'm going to call you Kathy—I'll watch for you on campus in September. Meanwhile, why don't you go along to Becker Hall on your own. I'll watch for Miss Sands. Do you remember the directions? Wait a minute, now," he said looking up and beyond her. "I spot a particularly able guide to see that you find your way. Michael!" He called to the student coming up the walk. "This is Michael Dunlop, Kathy. Miss Parker, Michael." The pastor smiled. "Do you have time to take Miss Parker to Becker Hall?"

"Be glad to," said the young man with a brisk nod.

Either she had seen him before or he reminded her of someone else, thought Kathy, falling into step beside him after saying goodby to the clergyman. Then she couldn't help thinking how lucky it was she had worn her full-skirted pink dress instead of slacks, and washed the shale dust out

of her hair the night before. Her next thought was that this arrow-straight young man with the short crisp brown hair must have exceptionally long legs. Keeping pace with him was an effort.

"I hope I'm not going too fast for you," he said finally. He tapped the thick book under his arm. "I have to get this to the library before it closes."

"Oh, then I am taking you out of your way," she said.

He reddened. "No, I didn't mean that. I thought that if we hurried we might have time to stop for a soda." He darted a glance at her. "That is, if you want to."

"Do I! I'm spittin' cotton, as the kids say back home."

"Where's home?"

"I was thinking of Floral City, but I don't live there any more." She told of her family's recent move.

"I come from Long Island," said Michael. "Sound Point."

"Our biggest game of the basketball season was with Sound Point." Kathy studied him closely. "I know! You—*you* were on the Sound Point team that time we were beaten so badly!"

Michael smiled and ducked his head. "Right. That was a while ago, though. This is my second year at Upstate. That is, this summer begins my second year of study. I plan to finish up two years by February. Then I can put in my six months with the Army. I'm in the Reserve, so that's all the active duty I need, unless something happens. You know —war."

"With everything, maybe the whole world blown up!" Kathy shivered. "War is too horrible to think about!"

"We have to if we're to prevent it, and keep that American faith in freedom going too."

"How can you say that right out like that and—and stay so calm?"

"Because that's the way things are," he said. Then when she remained silent, he caught her hand in his for a moment. "I didn't mean to scare your smile away."

"I was just thinking. I was thinking about the miniature museum at Circle's End." She told him briefly about Aunt Emily's accumulated treasures of generations gone by. "Those people worked so hard and suffered so much for everything we have today," She looked up hesitantly. "But I guess our generation has to face problems as bad or worse."

"Yes, we do," said Michael Dunlop with immediate understanding. "There's not much we can do about it this minute," he added. He had a practical kind of cheerfulness. "Besides, here we are at Becker Hall."

Kathy looked around. "I don't see Miss Sands. Rats! Now I can't go inside."

"You can try the doors. I'll stay here." He laughed and leaned against a tree. "Empty or not, it is a girls' dormitory."

Kathy went up the path alone. She gripped the brass knob on the front door. It refused to turn. She walked around to the side, rising on her toes, trying to see inside the ground floor but the windows were too high.

Shades were drawn over the back entrance and it too was firmly locked. Disappointed and out of breath after encircling the building, she was glad of Michael's company and

his quick suggestion that they head for the Varsity Sweet Shop at once.

It was very nice sitting opposite this brisk, practical young man, Kathy, decided and the iced drink was refreshing. Still, she could not shed the strange feeling she had experienced during her futile attempts to enter Becker Hall, a premonition you might call it. Certainly she didn't believe—she didn't think she believed—in premonitions any more than she believed in fortunetellers. She recalled how last spring in that Hungarian restaurant she had been warned of a disappointment, a temporary disappointment. For some reason, would those dormitory doors be closed against her in September too?

"I remember driving through Vickers Circle after Easter vacation," Michael was saying.

"Well, then," Kathy replied, burying her dire thoughts, "stop in and see the Parkers of Circle's End next time."

"I might do that. Summer session ends in late August. Now let's get to the library."

At the desk they said good-by. "I'm off to search the stacks —The Case of the Missing Professor," Kathy said in parting. A growing resentment made the little joke flat to her own ears. How could Miss Sands forget her promise so easily?

When she found the slender woman seated at a table, one book open before her and a pile of others beside her, Kathy couldn't help the annoyance in her voice. "I waited at the chapel for almost an hour."

Then Miss Sands looked up. Shimmering—that was the

only way Kathy could describe her expression—until she realized her surroundings and saw Kathy's slim angry figure standing over her.

"Kathy! Oh! What time is it?" the professor cried, visibly straining to orient herself. After a furtive glance at the wall clock, she stood up. "I promised to take you through the new dorm, didn't I, and now it's too late. How thoughtless of me, how dreadful! I am sorry. Really, I am!"

Kathy's irritation fled. Miss Sands looked so honestly distracted with her eyes glazed and her neatly coiffed hair awry. "It's all right, but we'd better get started back to Vickers Circle. They're closing the library anyway."

The young professor was thoughtfully quiet until they were halfway home, then she began to cry.

"Please. Don't," said Kathy. "Seeing inside Becker Hall wasn't that important to me."

"Yes, it was," insisted Miss Sands, "and it was important to Brandley too, my being at the groundbreaking ceremony for the new research building when he received that special fund-raising award for his fraternity." When they stopped for a red light, she dried her tears with a wispy handkerchief. "You see I did the very same thing to Brandley a few years ago. In fact, I locked myself in the Rare Books Room that time and missed the entire program. He was deeply hurt. Naturally. That's when we broke our engagement."

So that's how "books" had come between the doctor and Ellie Sands, thought Kathy.

"Working in education and the literary field makes me happier than being a good doctor's wife ever could," the

professor went on. "I can't pretend any more, and I'm too fond of Brandley to let him marry an impostor."

"Oh, Miss Sands, don't say that," protested Kathy.

"I must. It's true. I know now that I would be doing Brandley a terrible wrong if I married him. 'I could not love thee half so well loved I not honor—and honesty—more,'" she paraphrased with a sad sigh. "Oh, someday there may be someone else for me, someone who shares my interest and with whom I can be honest."

They drove a few miles in silence, then the slender woman said softly: "Celeste Vickers would be wonderful for Brandley, and he for her. Why didn't I see that before?" She sighed again, but with relief. "Tonight I'll get back to my thesis."

At the cottage it had been a literary day too. Aunt Emily had come to tea and left the damask-bound *Legend of Emily* for Kathy.

How she would love to keep it, but it belonged to Celeste's daughter. She disliked being unable to explain this to her mother. Mums seemed hurt for Aunt Emily's sake when Kathy left the little volume lying on the table.

"I'll put it away later," she said.

"I'm sure you'll be interested in these two letters then," said Mrs. Parker. "One from Lucy and one from Bob Lansford. Did you have a nice day? Oh, you must be tired. Why don't you go to bed early tonight?"

Though she took this suggestion, her sleep was filled with troubled dreams. Laden with books she circled Becker Hall trying dozens of doors and each was locked against her.

Next she found herself running through the university library chased by little Joan Emily whose chubby hands reached out for one of the books she carried. Bob Lansford appeared and snatched away *Legend of Emily* before Kathy could give it to the rightful heir, and he shouted, "Keep it if you want to. Just pretend you don't see her!" Then Miss Sands' voice cried out "I can't pretend!" Suddenly Lucy appeared, flinging her arms wide. "If I had known you were going to ask Michael Dunlop to the county fair I wouldn't have mentioned it to Bob Lansford."

Kathy awoke. Lucy doesn't know Michael, she thought fuzzily. She realized then it was only a dream, and like most dreams spun from a thread of truth. Lucy had written about hers and Jim's August visit, and she had mentioned telling Bob. Bob's letter had told of his intention to bunk at the Vickers Inn with Jim during that week end "and get in on the fun. Okay, Kath?"

Fully awake now, Kathy admitted how much she longed for Bob's fun-loving ways. How had she stayed mad so long? Why had she been so annoyed with him? The events of the Fourth seemed very remote. The days since had been long, sometimes depressing, listening to Celeste's sad story, worrisome too, seeing her father wait anxiously each day for some word about the new road and the new contract. And then there had been Hank! His whooping jumps at the horses had started again, and more than once his eight-year-old mischief had left Kathy shocked by the fiery heights of her own temper. How her hand itched to slap him!

Then she thought—hold on, am I feeling sorry for myself?

Self-pity was the most unattractive human emotion. She remembered reading that somewhere. Things hadn't been so bad. Each day's satisfactions had far outweighed its troubles. Today, for instance. In spite of her disappointment at not seeing the new dorm, it had averaged out to a pretty wonderful time. She turned on her side and smiled, remembering how she and Michael had gone through all the old high-school cheers in the Varsity Sweet Shop. He was nice. Wouldn't it be a coincidence if he did stop by when Lucy, Bob and Jim were here? He wouldn't though. He would forget her casual invitation by then. Probably she would too. Bob alone would be in her mind. He was beginning to fill her thoughts already. She closed her eyes contentedly, but when she fell back to sleep the endless frustrating attempts to enter Becker Hall began again.

# 10

NEXT MORNING SHE WAS TIRED AND CRANKY, IN NO MOOD FOR Celeste's brand-new guilt. Even Domino's winsome ways annoyed her.

"Why wouldn't Dr. Nilson sound provoked?" she asked sharply, yanking her handkerchief out of the big horse's mouth and putting it back in her pocket. "He asks you to dinner and you suggest he ask Miss Sands instead. That's silly!"

"I wanted to say yes but I'd feel so guilty taking him away from his fiancée."

Kathy stamped her foot. "Ooh! You do twist facts any which way to put yourself in the wrong! They aren't engaged now, and from what Miss Sands said yesterday they never will be again. She wants it that way!"

Celeste looked happily startled. "She does? Do you think I should phone the doctor and tell him I would like to go tonight after all?" Her smile vanished. "I forgot. I can't go anyway. My landlady is going out this evening. Who will mind Joan Emily?"

The large eyes saddened. Kathy's irritation became acute.

The restless night had shortened her temper. Ordinarily she was careful not to offend the young widow, too careful, she thought suddenly. Today she felt just ornery enough to risk hurting her sensitive feelings.

"I'll mind the baby," she snapped. "Leave her here on your way to dinner. It's time my parents knew about Joanie. Time Aunt Emily did too. In fact, I'll ask Mums to invite her over tonight and that will settle that!" Don't I sound bossy, thought Kathy. She'll never speak to me again.

Aside from a fleeting frown, Celeste made no protest. "Thanks, Kathy," she said submissively, and looped her mare's reins over a wall peg. "I'll call the doctor now, before we go to Clovedale."

"I'll go to the station alone this morning."

"All right," was the meek answer. "There won't be much. This afternoon is the big one, the last of the tubes for this contract." She stood thoughtfully still for a moment, then she gave each horse a gentle pat. "I have a feeling it's the last of our pony express too. I think Grammer will insist that Mr. Parker use her road for the next contract after tonight. She doesn't know the trouble he's been having these past weeks because he's too honest to violate her property rights. I'm going to tell her. Joan Emily might make her view things differently. Surely she'll want to help save this town for her great-grandchild, for her Johnny's daughter."

Domino loped along. Until they reached the pine grove where Hank usually appeared with a whoop and a holler, the big spotted horse was at ease. Kathy could safely slacken the reins and let her thoughts wander. Wasn't it strange

how those few sharp remarks had forced Celeste from her guilt-woven cocoon, where weeks of kindly understanding by both the doctor and herself had failed? Being hateful had brought good results. Only love should do that. But then she had been irritable because of love, really—Miss Sands' love of books that had prevented her from seeing the new dorm that had, in turn, brought on the nightmare that had made her cranky and rude this morning.

There was no use trying to figure some things out. Life was full of unsolved mysteries. "And there," she thought, cautiously gathering up the reins, "is one small mystery right up ahead, Hank, in full view, sitting on a rock with his chin between his knees." Why wasn't he hiding behind a tree, getting ready to jump out and screech "Hands up!"

This mystery was soon untangled. "I'm hungry," wailed Hank. "I couldn't eat my breakfast. I was too 'cited about scarin' you with my new gun—it's a repeater—and now I'm too starving to be a bad man. Give me a ride home? Please? Huh, Kathy, please?"

"I'm not in a pleasant mood. Even when I am, I don't do favors for bad men," she said, but she beckoned him over.

He slid from the rock and ran to her. "I'm good Hank this morning."

"I know," she said, pulling him up into the saddle. "How about later?"

"I can never tell when that bad ole Hank is comin' back," he confessed. "We're friends though, aren't we?"

Kathy laughed. With his two front teeth still too big for

his face, he looked like a distressed little chipmunk, and as harmless.

"Yes, friendly Kathy just chased grouchy Kathy away." She welcomed the surging return of her usual good humor and would have hugged the little boy if his shirt hadn't been so muddy. "I know your mother sends you off shining clean every morning," she said. "How do you get so dirty so fast?"

The boy grunted. "That's easy." He said no more until they reached the station where he wriggled to the ground and declared, "I can walk from here." He started to run off, then turned and swaggered back. "Mighty obliged. Here," he reached up and pressed something into her hand. "A gold nuggle from my secret mine. I allus pay my way."

"Oh?" Kathy studied the milky stone on her palm. It was the one the boy wouldn't part with at the hospital a few weeks ago. "Thanks," she called, thinking how cute he looked stalking down the platform. She joined the railroad express clerk's laughter, wrapped the stone in her handkerchief and put it in the pocket of her jeans. There were only two flat packages of wire for her saddlebags and she let Domino trot all the way home.

After lunch Guy Weighlund sneezed seven times. He mopped his watering eyes and drawled, "Well, here it is. My father's is early this year too."

"What is?" asked Kathy.

She had been holding her breath while her father read a formidable-looking three-page letter from his customer. It was a warning, an ultimatum of sorts. If the present order was not completed within ten days, the contract would be

canceled and no new contract would be forthcoming. Her father had tossed the letter aside with a firm, "We can make it," and Kathy had exhaled with relief.

Automatically she said, "God bless you," after Guy's eighth sneeze, and asked again, "What's early this year?"

"My hay fever," said the postmaster's son. "When that starts I usually take a few weeks off."

"Oh, no!" cried Kathy, then added quickly. "That's too bad. Can't the doctor help you with one of the new drugs?"

"No, not the Weighlund brand of hay fever," said Guy proudly. "It's different, not the common kind." He held up one hand. "I won't take time off this year. I'll do my best. That won't be much. Look at my eyes. I can hardly see what my own hands are doing, let alone read those wiring diagrams."

"We need a few more setbacks," she said.

"It will work out," said her father. "Today the last shipment of tubes comes in. After that you and Celeste will be free to stay here and help Guy. I'll ride over with the finished amplifiers when the time comes. These last are the bigger ones, too heavy for you girls anyway."

"I think you may be driving them over in that pickup truck you so hopefully bought last spring, Dad." Her eyes brightened, remembering Celeste's prediction. "Umm, after tonight you'll be spinning right along Aunt Emily's road. Wait and see." She clamped her lips together, shot her father a teasing glance and left to join Celeste at the stable.

"I did it," said the young widow. "I called Dr. Nilson and told him I had changed my mind. He was very understand-

ing. We're going to the Rip Van Winkle Lodge for dinner. I'm afraid to be so happy. Maybe I'll be awkward and he'll wish he hadn't asked me, or maybe it will all be spoiled when we get back to your house. Grammer might not be pleased about Joan Emily at all. She might—"

"Oh, stop, Celeste!"

"Don't be angry at me. You were this morning, weren't you?"

"Not at you, really. I was cranky because I didn't sleep well last night." Kathy told about her attempts to enter the new dormitory and about her premonition. "If Dad doesn't get this new contract that premonition may come true. I know we Parkers are short of cash these days."

Celeste edged her mare closer to Kathy's mount. "Listen, anyone who has the grades and wants to go to college, can. Besides student loans, there are any number of ways you can work your way through."

"I know. That classmate I sent the rocks to wrote and said he'd found that out. I'm glad for him, but it's different for me." She frowned. "You see, Dad sent both my brother and sister through college. It would hurt him, hurt his pride, if I had to borrow or work my way. He'd think I'd lost faith in him and he'd lose some faith in himself."

She groped for words. "You know my mother's endless supply of optimistic sayings. Well, you might not think so to look at him, but Dad needs them. He needs us all to have faith in him. Anyway, I haven't any doubts about his business ability, but he does need more time than he counted on to overcome all these obstacles."

"Your idea of using the horses overcame a big one," said Celeste. "Now it's over. I'm positive we're riding up to the station for the last time. I've enjoyed it, all of it, even Hank in a left-handed sort of way. He missed us today. Why, I wonder."

"He's probably been confined for getting so dirty," said Kathy, after telling of her morning encounter. "Where do you suppose this hide-out of his can be?"

Celeste smiled. "Johnny would know. He knew every rock, tree, cave and creek of Circle's End." Her eyes widened and she whispered, "That's the first time I've been able to speak of Johnny without wanting to cry, without feeling guilty about his death. I feel ready to begin a new life for myself. That makes me sad. Endings are sad.

Kathy knew what she meant. "Here now, let's get those tubes, end our pony express in triumph, and get ready for the next obstacle, Guy's hay fever!"

"Poor fellow, he must be miserable."

"No. In fact, he seemed quite pleased that no cure could be found for the distinctive Weighlund allergy." To prevent Celeste from lapsing into seriousness, she tried some nonsense. "Do you suppose there's a kind of family love for any inherited trait, no matter what—sneezy allergies, bushy eyebrows, webbed toes—"

"Heavens! I'm sure I don't know!" The young widow laughed and helped Kathy ease the boxes of fragile tubes into the saddle bags. "We mustn't laugh on the way back, or even breathe very hard. These are delicate little do-jiggers."

Sultry heat hazed the meadows behind the station. Before noon, thunderclouds had huddled over the mountains as though plotting a lashing storm, but they had since drifted off. Left behind were vaporous puffs, making the mountains appear nearer, rounder. On clear cool mornings they looked so distant, almost two-dimensional, as though cut from cardboard. The mountains. At first Kathy hadn't liked their hovering appearance. Even now sometimes, when looking at them made her think about God on weekdays, she felt uncomfortable.

She was glad to reach their wooded trail. "How we need rain," she said, moving up ahead. Bushy firs grabbed at their saddlebags when they rode abreast, so when carrying tubes they went single file. They walked the horses too, to prevent breakage. Usually this made her impatient, but today the slow pace failed to rankle. So much depended on getting this last shipment safely into the carriage house. After that she would relax, treat herself to a good fast ride. Domino, like most big horses, was as comfortable as a rocking chair when he cantered. She would let him out. The wind would whip through her hair. Her blouse would billow.

Right now perspiration had it plastered between her shoulder blades. She reached back to pull at it and in that moment, several things happened at once. A shower of pine cones rained from above. The staccato report of a repeater cap pistol rent the woodland quiet. A squeaky voice declared, "Hands up! You're dead!" Domino reared. With a toss of his head, he wrenched the reins from Kathy's hand, pivoted on his hind legs and started back, headlong toward Celeste and her mare.

Celeste tried to get her mount out of the way, but the chestnut horse was as rigid in her terror as Domino was wild in his. The girls' knees sideswiped and the saddlebags smashed together. Above the sounds of shattering glass came a gleeful shout, "I scared you good this time!"

"Hank!" cried Celeste. "Look, he's up there in the tree."

Kathy soothed her horse, retrieved the reins, handed them to her companion and dismounted. She moved with icy efficiency though fury seethed inside. Just wait until she got her hands on that chortling little demon she had thought so cute this morning!

"Aw, Kathy, don't be mad. I wouldn't shoot you for real. You're my friend," piped Hank looking down from his leafy perch.

"You are not my friend, now or ever," said Kathy through clenched jaws. She reached up and caught him by the wrist but he slipped free. He scrambled to a lower branch, swung to the ground, and ran into the bushes.

She ran after him, uncaring that branches scratched her face and shoulders, that jutting rocks bruised her legs. Her temples were pounding. For the first time she knew what "seeing red" meant. Her vision was blurred, she was so angry. In bits and pieces came the realization of what Hank's mischief could mean this time—cancellation of the old contract, loss of the new one. Yet even this seemed unimportant at the moment. Nothing mattered except getting hold of Hank.

After catching sight of his tousled head among some low brush she moved more stealthily. But when he looked back he saw her at once and stuck out his tongue. "Oooh!"

she cried, leaping after him. Then she looked beyond and saw the rocky cliff confronting him. Her quarry had reached a dead end.

"You're as good as caught," she called. "Give up!" She took time now to choose less rugged footing. Hank wasn't going anywhere.

When she reached the foot of the cliff she put her hands on her hips and looked around. The boy had vanished. She searched a clump of sumac, the only vegetation near by except for some rock-stunted scrub halfway up the cliff.

"Hank!" she called again and again. Only a lookout crow's warning "Caw! Caw!" broke the silence.

She studied the cliff of layered shale rock. He could, she supposed, find footholds to get himself up and over the top. She was too spent to follow. She turned back, thinking it was probably just as well she hadn't caught him. She was too angry. She might have spanked him too hard. What good would it have done anyway?

Celeste agreed when Kathy returned. "Punishing Hank won't restore these shattered tubes. Let's get on to the shop and see what can be salvaged."

# 11

HALF OF THE TUBES, THOSE IN EACH RIGHT-SIDE SADDLEBAG, proved to be undamaged, but Mr. Parker shook his head. "In this case half a loaf isn't better than none. We can't finish the order with what's left." He tried to cheer the disheartened girls. "I'll drive down to the city tomorrow and try to get more. Now we're quitting. It's almost dinnertime."

After Celeste and Guy went their separate ways, Kathy realized it was also time to break the news about Joan Emily. "I've invited company to dinner, Dad," she said as they walked toward the kitchen door.

"Company!" Mrs. Parker squinted through the screen. "Oh, Kathy, we're only having stew tonight."

When Kathy revealed their small guest's identity, her father said glumly: "Stew seems most appropriate. It's what we've all been in, for one reason or another, all summer. Tonight now, poor Aunt Emily will probably have another spell right in our living room when she sees a great-grandchild she never knew existed. That thoughtless girl! To keep such a secret! I thought Celeste had more sense."

"Matt, it isn't like you to judge so harshly," said Mrs. Parker. "Oh, I know you're upset about the broken tubes, and about your customer's growing impatience. Guy told me. But he also told me about that big government contract you could bid on in September if the old shale-brick factory were—"

Kathy sensed that some warning glance or gesture from her father had stopped Mums in midsentence. Before she could be sure, though, Mrs. Parker retreated to her initial remark. "We musn't judge Celeste's past actions, and I'm sure Aunt Emily will suffer no ill effects. I'll go over later and prepare her for the shock during our walk back here to the cottage."

This Mrs. Parker did and that night, free at last to disclose Celeste's secret to her best friend, Kathy went on to report in her letter to Lucy that:

*Our stew must have left tear-provoking onion fumes throughout the house. When Aunt Emily took her great-granddaughter onto her lap Mums and I wept a little. When Celeste returned with the doctor and saw her baby curled so contentedly in "Grammer's" arms, tears began rolling down her cheeks too. Later, when Aunt Emily put the damask-bound family poem (which I returned, of course) in Joan Emily's chubby hands, even Dad and Dr. Nilson looked suspiciously red-eyed.*

Far from being shaken, Aunt Emily had immediately begun to plan for the child's future. First, Celeste must move to the big house, "at least for the time being," the elderly woman had added with a sidelong glance at Dr. Nil-

son. Then the town must get that new road started before spring. Then Mr. Parker would be in a position to start the old factory humming again with that big government contract Postmaster Weighlund had told her about. She ignored Mr. Parker's comment that, "the sneezing Weighlunds are obviously not allergic to the grapevine," and went on to insist that he use her private road so as not to lose the first hope of rejuvenation the Circle had known in years. Rejuvenate it would. She would see to it! Joan Emily must grow up proud of her heritage.

*And so,* [wrote Kathy, having no way of knowing that Lucy would be in a stew of her own when next they met] *there'll be no more stewing over transportation anyway. But before long we may have nothing to transport, and all because of Hank.*

Her fingers tightened around her pen as she wrote about Hank's costly mischief.

A seemingly unimportant postscript about "a government contract that everyone except Dad seems interested in" started a long, agonizing dilemma for Kathy. Minutes after she sealed the letter, put out her light, and got into bed, she overheard the real reason for her father's refusal to go after that big government project "that could," her mother's voice insisted as she walked with Dad beside the creek, "employ a hundred and fifty people and really revive the Circle. Most important to me, Matt, it would give you back the position and responsibilty you deserve, all the hard-earned gains you lost because of Mr. Lansford's unethical dealings. Oh, I know there'd be another road

problem. No one has traced Weighlund's cousin so he can sign that release. I know it would cost a lot to fix up the old factory too. But my woman's intuition tells me—"

"No!" her father interrupted forcefully. "Now that we can use Aunt Emily's road we'll be able to hang on, *if* we get the next small contract. If we don't, I'll simply have to admit failure and call Lansford about that position he offered."

Kathy heard her mother gasp, but Dad went relentlessly on. "Of course I'd like nothing better than tackling that big project. It would be stimulating, a challenge for me and a lifesaver for Vickers Circle. However, I will not risk Kathy's education fund to rehabilitate that old factory! That's final!"

If only I didn't know, thought Kathy many, many times during the weeks that followed. For though the carriage house resounded with jokes about their "horse-Hank-hay-fever contract" and boasts about finishing with time to spare, when the long-awaited summer storm struck and unleashed its violence on every power line in the county, they all knew the battle was as good as lost.

Three days later, an hour after power was restored, Mr. Parker's customer phoned. He agreed to accept the balance of the long-overdue amplifiers, but " regretted" that no new contract would be forthcoming.

Because Lucy, Jim and Bob were due the next day, Kathy knew her parents pretended an optimism they could not be feeling. Probably her father would wait until she went off to college before breaking the news to her about leaving

Vickers Circle. Abandoning his hopes, that's what he would be doing. What was happening to his self-confidence? "Two failures in a row," she overheard him say. He mustn't feel that way. He mustn't! And yet—oh, she knew it was selfish—she coudn't help wishing she didn't know the alternative, that her education fund would enable him to fight his way back to the top where he belonged. That wasn't facing up. She could, though, go blithely off to school next month on the pretense that all was well.

Or she could—well, what could she do? Getting a student loan would hurt her father more. She could postpone going for a year. All he needed was time to get started. But how could she look Dad in the eye and say she had changed her mind about going to Upstate this September. She couldn't, because she hadn't. Oh, she wanted to go so much. Yet how could she, knowing it cost Dad's hope for a new start. How could she study, knowing that? How could she feel right about herself?

Clearly forked though her path had become, either way seemed impossible at the moment. The heat didn't help unscramble her thinking either. She went upstairs, changed into her swim suit and headed for the creek. Though too shallow for swimming, the creek had many cool think spots along its banks.

A rustling in the bushes made her reach quickly for a stick. Instead of the expected blacksnake, Hank appeared. Kathy threw the stick down. So swiftly did her temper mount she feared she might whack him where he needed it most.

"Go away," she said coldly.

"Aw, Kathy, you still mad? I haven't scared you for a long time. Don't you like me again, huh?" pleaded Hank.

She glared. "No, I do not. Go home!" she yelled.

It relieved her own confused feelings to raise her voice at Hank, one cause of her dilemma. Yet when he looked up at her, his lower lip trembling, and then scuffed off hanging his tousled head, the creek bank suddenly seemed spoiled for thinking. She ran back to the cottage, showered and put on her sleeveless blouse and pleated skirt. She would go to the library and confide in Miss Sands.

As had Celeste, the professor suggested a student loan or part-time job, but Kathy explained why this solution was out.

Said Miss Sands admiringly: "I think it's wonderful, your even thinking of sacrificing something you want so much in order that Vickers Circle can secure that government contract." She became very serious. "Do you remember asking me how a dying town can be saved? I said I was trying to answer that question in my thesis. You prove that I have, Kathy, for I concluded that a town dies without the discipline of poverty, which no thinking person wants, unless some unselfish people like you, Kathy, love their town enough to make personal sacrifices for it if necessary."

Kathy blushed at this undeserved praise. "Miss Sands, I don't care about the town. I love my father. Of course I want him to get that contract so he can do the kind of work he wants to do and be the success he deserves to be.

I—I wouldn't like myself much if I thought I could help and didn't."

The assistant professor looked deflated for a moment. Then the dimple appeared in her cheek. "It amounts to the same thing, doesn't it? Your sacrifice could save the town even though you're guided by love for one person instead of humanity in general. My theory holds!"

"Yes, yes." Fond as she was of Miss Sands, Kathy was a trifle exasperated. Miss Sands and her theories! Everyone knew—even she at seventeen knew—that people didn't act according to any theory. They acted according to—well, they just acted like people. "What I want to know is, how do I go about it? If I decide to go through with it."

Finally, she managed to coax Miss Sands from her ivory tower long enough to get some useful information. When Kathy left for home she had two typewritten letters in her big white purse—one to the Dean of Upstate requesting a year's postponement of her admission, and one to her parents explaining her action. Both were to be mailed from her sister's home when she went down after Labor Day for a week of wardrobe shopping at Finch's in Floral City, if she decided to make "the noble sacrifice" as Miss Sands insisted on calling it.

Kathy was far from sure. Miss Sands had advised taking the full three weeks to decide in, and she had agreed. Surely, she thought, Lucy would have some sensible ideas to offer when she arrived with Bob and Jim late tomorrow afternoon.

When Lucy did arrive that hope fled. More amazing than Lucy's complete lack of interest in Kathy's problem, however, was her complete change in personality. From a calm, reasonable girl with an answer to almost any question, she had become a panicky, wild-eyed young woman terrified of losing "her chance at happiness" as she kept calling it.

"You saw the headlines in yesterday's paper," she rasped. She and Kathy had left Jim and Bob to help with the barbecue while they went upstairs to comb their hair and freshen their lipstick. "You read about that trouble overseas. Jim will have to go. All the boys will have to go." Her dark eyes were feverishly bright. "Kathy, I've said unkind things about Bob, but, oh, Kathy, if you love him, marry him, before it's too late. Jim and I are being married as soon as we can."

"Lucy!" Kathy fell back into the boudoir chair aghast. "You're not serious? What about school? What about that three-year engagement, all the sensible plans you and Jim had?"

"There's no time to be sensible," cried her friend, clawing the rose-sprigged bedspread with rough bitten nails. "Don't you read the newpapers?"

"Of course I do!" A shiver ran through her. Then Kathy thought of the comfort she had found in remembering Michael Dunlop's practical attitude. "That's the way things are. This new international incident is about one-tenth as serious as some others that have been settled peacefully during the past few years." She leaned toward

her friend and said softly, "Lucy, this isn't like you. You act—well, possessed!"

"I am. I'm terrified," said Lucy hoarsely. "I can't eat or sleep. I don't care about school. All I can think about is marrying—now!"

"What does Jim say about it?"

"Jim? Oh, he feels the same. Only worse. He has to ask his parents' permission. I'm old enough, but a boy must be twenty-one. I don't have to ask anyone. I'm eighteen!" she said defiantly.

How differently Lucy had said, "I'm eighteen," just a few months ago. It was incredible, thought Kathy, that love could do this to a person. Then all at once she knew it wasn't love. A powerful mixture of emotions gripped Lucy, mostly fear. And perhaps, Jim, like Celeste's dead Johnny, was so caught up by the intensity of his own feelings that he couldn't think straight either.

Then, as Lucy went on, Kathy began to suspect that her friend feared losing this vague "last chance at happiness" more than a particular person called Jim. His name barely entered the rapid-fire arguments in favor of an immediate marriage. The day had come when Lucy was wrong, so wrong! Kathy knew no satisfaction. She was frightened for her friend.

"You have elopement fever," she said finally. "I'm going to ask Celeste over this evening. I hope she can talk you out of this madness."

Lucy's lips were a thin line. "I counted on you to understand, Kathy."

"I do. I think I do. Now, please, let's go down."

"Later." Lucy's look was icy. "You go." She switched on the radio. "I have to listen to the news broadcast."

Bob spun Kathy around and kissed her forehead. "Greetings, greetings, hostess mine. Beautiful, blonde, but never on time." He cocked an eyebrow and thumped his chest. "I'm a poet!" After looking over Jim's shoulder and inspecting the steaks, he added, "Where's the dark-eyed siren, Lucy. I'm starved."

As Kathy laughed appreciatively at each of his witty remarks, she thought again how good looking he was, how much fun. However, when Dad asked how Mr. Lansford was, that dark sullen mask she had noticed on Fourth of July covered his features.

"Dad is jumpy as a cat," grumbled Bob. "If you ask me he has a job too big for him. And, gee, does he take it out on me! Cut down expenses. That's all I've been hearing lately." Fortunately Lucy appeared, cutting short his complaint. He jumped up, smiling. "At last, we eat!"

All through supper Bob's lighthearted banter continued. Shortly after, though, in clearing the picnic table, Jim clumsily tipped over a bottle of soda, drenching Bob's clean white sock and shoe. Muttering under his breath, young Lansford tore into the house, yelling for paper towels. When he returned he was sulky.

Though Mrs. Parker made no comment, she seemed unable to hide the fact this time that Bob was not one of her favorites. Kathy noticed her father's annoyed glances too. Mentally she rushed to Bob's defense. He had his

faults like everyone else. She caught his glance and smiled. However, she had to admit the county fair week end wasn't off to a good start. Lucy, after refusing to eat, sat stiffly beside Jim and spoke only when spoken to.

Later, after Celeste (at Kathy's telephoned suggestion) had dropped by and tactfully turned the conversation to the hazards of an impulsive marriage, Lucy simply refused to talk at all. Much later that night Kathy found out why. Celeste's warnings had found a receptive pair of ears. Not Lucy's. Jim's!

"Now Jim wants us to wait and think it over for at least a month," wailed Lucy from the bed. Abruptly then she sat up, pounded the pillow with both fists and stared at Kathy, an almost fanatical gleam in her eye. "It's all your fault! And you're supposed to be my friend!"

With a toss of her glossy hair she swung her feet to the floor and pulled her suitcase from beneath the bed. "I'm leaving. After I pack, I'm going to call Jim at Vickers Inn. We'll taxi to Clovedale tomorrow morning and get the first train out of here!"

# 12

FOR THE SECOND TIME MICHAEL DUNLOP APPEARED AT A moment when Kathy felt deserted.

Saturday morning, a little after seven, an old black sedan chugged up to the chained entrance of Circle's End and stopped. Kathy was sitting beside the cold barbecue pit, alone. Lucy and Jim had gone. Her parents still slept, and Bob had sent word via Jim that he planned to stay in bed until at least ten-thirty. So the swim-breakfast at North Lake was off too.

When she saw the driver get out of the car, duck under the chain, and start up the drive, Kathy decided to meet him halfway. Another lost tourist, she thought, glad of the chance to talk to someone, if only to give directions. Then, as the distance between them lessened, she called his name in happy recognition.

His steps quickened. "I wasn't sure you would remember. I almost drove on. It's too early for calling, I know, but I can't stay more than a moment anyway."

His very erect posture eased somewhat when she cordially protested, "You must stay longer than that. I'm glad you didn't drive on."

As they walked toward the cottage he looked around. "This is nice. Real country."

"It certainly is," said Kathy brightly. His eyes crinkled at the outside corners when he smiled, she noticed. The scent of his shaving cream or hair tonic was brisk, like his manner. "Circle's End is rural living all right—trees, mountains, a creek. Even horses."

"No fooling?" He bent and looked into her face. "Do you keep horses?"

"Yes. Two. One is mine and the other belongs to the girl who lives in the big house over there," she explained. "Would you like to ride?"

"Now?" His eagerness was surprisingly boyish.

Kathy laughed. "Why not? Just wait until I change into my jeans."

Domino was as ready as ever to show off. He nibbled at Michael's short crisp hair, slapped his tongue against Kathy's arm and then, when she turned to get the bridle, the big spotted horse caught the corner of her handkerchief in his mouth and pulled it from her back pocket. With a thud it fell to the stable floor, disgorging its weighty content, Hank's gold "nuggle" from his secret mine.

"Hmm," said Michael, reaching for the smooth milky stone. "Do you go spelunking too?" When Kathy frowned, he laughed. "Spelunking is cave exploring." He gestured with the stone. "This looks like a piece of a stalactite, you know, from a cave."

"Oh, that!" exploded Kathy and then recounted the

disastrous day the eight-year-old had given it to her. "And I'm still mad," she admitted.

Michael smiled wryly and tossed the stone away. "So ends the beautiful friendship between Kathy and Hank."

She couldn't help responding to the twinkle in his eye. "It is silly, isn't it, getting so mad at a little boy?"

"Huh, I know exactly how you feel!" He ducked his head and spoke from the side of his mouth. "I have two younger brothers. They've had me boiling more than once." He smiled. "Only my mother loves them all the time. When they get into trouble, though, I have to admit they're not so bad after all."

While they walked their horses along the narrow pine-needle trail, they talked, skipping from one topic to another. She heard of his flexible plans.

"I'm still not sure what I want to do," he said. "I like math. Maybe it will be one of the sciences. Then again, architecture interests me too."

He listened so attentively to her plans, that she was tempted to ask his advice about her immediate dilemma. On second thought, she decided their acquaintance too short for such a confidence.

On the way back Michael accepted her invitation to breakfast. Her parents' obvious liking for him led finally to Mrs. Parker's insistent, "The phone is right there, Michael. Do call home and tell them you'll be later than you planned."

When Michael went off with Mr. Parker to get the mail before the post office closed at noon, Kathy heard her

father say on their way to the car: "Since you're interested in architecture, Michael, you might like to see how they built a factory half a century ago. We'll walk over later. It isn't much on design, not exactly another Taj Mahal, but it is solid. You'll wonder at the waste of leaving it idle."

So, thought Kathy, say what he would, Dad wished desperately to start that empty factory going again. She plunged her hands into the soapy dishwater and tried not to think about it.

A second later the telephone rang. Bob, she thought. She had forgotten all about him. Then she heard her mother answer. From the agitated conversation that followed she knew it wasn't Bob.

"Have you seen Hank?" called Mums.

When Kathy dried her hands and went into the living room, her mother covered the mouthpiece and whispered: "It's Hank's mother. It seems she thought Hank's father put him to bed and he thought she had, some sort of mix-up, and now they realize he's been gone all night. Poor woman, she's hysterical."

"I saw him yesterday afternoon. Here by the creek," Kathy said slowly. A knot tightened within her. No, no one could drown in that shallow water. "Oh, he'll turn up," she said.

"Kathy will search the grounds," Mrs. Parker was saying. "I'll call the state troopers. Try not to worry too much."

When Mr. Parker and Michael returned they joined the search, but not a rock or tree of Circle's End con-

cealed the impish Hank. Kathy even climbed the rock ledge where Hank had so mysteriously disappeared that day she had chased him. She combed the grove and meadow beyond. No piping voice answered her call.

Bob Lansford was standing in the drive beside his little red car when they returned. Plaid cap pushed back on his head, he asked: "Why all the fuss about this Hank being lost? From what you wrote, Kath, I thought you couldn't stand the sight of him. Anyway, the troopers are taking over. Let's get going to this fair." He seemed annoyed, but acknowledged Kathy's introduction of Michael politely enough.

Michael, however, shifted his feet and reddened. Bob's appearance made him feel he had intruded on a pre-arranged date for two, Kathy realized. Partly to put him at ease and partly because Bob's attitude suddenly irritated her, she cut in smoothly: "You see, Michael, I tried to get a few classmates together for the county fair. Only Bob could come. It's lucky you stopped by. Now it will seem more like a group thing, the way I planned it. That is, if we go." She looked at her father.

"I think you should," said Mr. Parker. "There's nothing any of us can do now except hope and pray the boy is safe."

There was something magical about the tinkling monotony of carrousel music, nostalgic too, thought Kathy. It revived exciting memories of that first pink mound of cotton candy bigger than your own head, that first hot dog with mustard, the first time you drew a bangled bracelet out of the grab bag.

Of course, she had never been to a county fair before, only the small volunteer firemen's carnival back home on Long Island. The boys were as unprepared as she for the square half-mile of gaudy gaiety—animal exhibits, handicraft displays, snaking, whirling rides.

After a rollicking ride on the roller coaster, squeezed three in a seat, they tried the Ferris wheel, then the dive bomber.

"Now for the whip," said Michael, and Bob in equally high spirits said, "Let's go! I want to try that shooting gallery too! And I'm going to bid on a calf or a pig in that auction over there later."

"What will your father say? Oh," Kathy cried laughing, "can't we walk for a while, if we still can!" She brushed her windblown hair out of her eyes and smiled up at each of the boys in turn. Both looked as happily carefree as she felt. A county fair was a wonderful place to forget all about making decisions and other serious matters.

Hank's disappearance flooded back into her mind as she sank to a bench and eased her heels out of her flats. Why should it trouble her so? Though Bob's remarks before had annoyed her, she saw his logic. After all, she had been close to hating that child. Why should she be worrying over his safety?

Then began a frustrating sense of having forgotten something to do with Hank, something not important at the time, but it was that same maddening sensation of having the very word you wanted escape. That same tantalizing feeling that you could solve a problem in geometry if only you could remember the right theorem. She swung her

feet. One shoe fell off, and she groped for it with her toes.

"Oooh!" she muttered as she hit a sharp stone. Stone. Tiny hairs on the back of her neck prickled. Stone. "That stone!" she cried aloud. "I've got it. Michael, you said that stone Hank gave me came from a cave. That's what he meant by his secret mine, his lair. Oh, I'll bet that's where he is, in some cave!"

"Well, eureka!" said Bob. "Don't get back on the subject of Hank again. I'm ready for some more fun. How about you two?"

"I couldn't now," she said. "Don't you see, I've got to go back."

"What?" Bob scowled. "Creeps! Telephone, can't you? Don't kill the day!"

"Only I know the spot where the entrance to the cave might be." That cliff, she thought. No wonder Hank had disappeared so quickly. "Time may be important. Hank may be trapped by a slide, or hurt from a fall. Don't you see?" She searched Bob's face for understanding.

"No." Bob stood up. "Want to try that whip, Mike?"

"If Hank has been trapped in a cave all night, he must be scared almost to death by now. He's only a little kid," said Michael quietly. "Come on, Bob, we'd better go back. Kathy's hunch is worth investigating."

Bob's brow arched. "Maybe. Kath can call the troopers about it from here. We came in my car. We're staying. That's my decision."

Kathy gripped her big white purse with both hands. She fixed Bob Lansford with a steady gaze. "I've made a few

decisions of my own. I'm going back to Circle's End if I have to walk the three miles. And I don't care, Bob, if I ever see you again!"

"Okay, okay." Bob stalked off without a backward glance.

She turned her head to hide the first smarting tears. No longer could she deceive herself. The Bob she had been in love with was an illusion of her own making. She had only been in love with love after all. Loneliness crept over her. Without Bob, how empty her dreams would be!

Two strong hands grasped hers. "Enough of that," said Michael, pulling her to her feet. "I'll help you find Hank if I can, but I refuse to carry you three miles." His eyes coaxed her to smile again. "That kind of chivalry doesn't appeal to me."

Postmaster Weighlund's drawled, "Want a hitch?" was music to their ears. Since he was headed for Clovedale, they decided to approach the rock ledge from the old pony express trail. The postmaster promised to alert the state troopers about Kathy's hunch at once, but he wasn't very opmistic.

"If it's a cave that's got the boy, it's probably too late already. Underground caverns are treacherous. A step too far this way or that and you're hurtling down a rock hole into eternity." But he gave them a flashlight "just in case."

When they reached the base of the ledged cliff, Michael pointed to the clump of scrub halfway up. "That's where I'd look first. There could be an opening behind it."

There was. How big they never would have imagined until they parted the bushes and peered in, one at a time.

Kathy held fast to a gnarled branch with one hand and brushed at her blouse and slacks, already streaked with the same reddish-brown mud that usually caked Hank's stubby boots.

"Oh, Michael, I know this is his hide-out. The entrance is narrow. You wouldn't fit, but I think I can." She took the light. After squeezing her shoulders through she could see that the sliding passage veered left. She wiggled in a little deeper and called, "Hank!" The mocking echoes of her cry sent a chill through her. What lay beyond?

When the reverberations ceased she inched in farther still. A few feet ahead was a natural arch, blocked though, by fallen rock. Could Hank be trapped behind it? She stretched her neck and looked over the pile of shattered rock. She looked again, unable to believe what she saw. Her awed cry echoed and reechoed around the snowy rippling pillars of the underground chamber beyond, which delved at least thirty feet below her eye level. Studded with diamond-bright calcite, its walls glistened. Tree roots and lacy tendrils had crept down through crevices in the earth above. Frosted with radiant beauty, they festooned the chamber's ceiling. If fairies had suddenly appeared in one of the pristine grottoes she wouldn't have been too surprised.

But then, at the sound of a squeaky little voice, the fairyland became a yawning tomb. Hank! She caught her lip between her teeth. Hank must be perched on some ledge above the chamber. One backward step and—

"I'm here, Kathy, behind the rocks," he sobbed. "They

crashed down a long time ago and I can't get back. I called and called." His sobs began echoing.

"I'll get you out in a minute." Kathy's heart was beating fast. Its rapid pumping roared in her ears. Please, God, don't let him step back! "You push on the rocks and I'll pull," she said as calmly as she could. Just keep leaning this way, Hank, she silently begged. She wriggled out the entrance, pulling as many rocks with her as she could. After telling Michael the news she plunged back in for more.

Her fifth trip. All the rocks were cleared away except for one, a long flat layer of shale tightly wedged within the arch. Stretch as she would, her fingers could not reach its jagged side. "Hank, lean hard against it. Try to move it just half an inch so I can get a hold on it," she said. When he did not answer she cried out, "Hank, are you there?"

His tousled head appeared above the rock, then his grimy, tearstained cheeks.

"Are you still mad at me, Kathy?" His voice quivered. "Are you my friend again?"

"Good grief! Never mind that now!"

His dignity reasserted itself. "Say you like me. Then I'll push very hard."

"I do. I like you. We're friends. I love you." I must, in a way, she thought, or I wouldn't be wishing so hard to see that chipmunk smile of his again. "Right now I love you very much. Please, push!"

"You didn't yesterday," squeaked Hank. "Why do you now? Tell me why, and I'll knock this ole rock right down."

Kathy groaned. Then she saw the curve of his cheek.

Hers was soft. but his was softer still. And the sweep of his brow was babyish, as was the grubby hand he kept rubbing through his hair. She knew then why his safety had concerned her so, in spite of all the damage he had caused. He was only a little kid, as Michael had said. No matter what he had done, he must be forgiven now. He was in trouble.

"Why do you love me now? Why?" he kept repeating.

"Because you're so darn young!" Too young to be hurt. To die? No, she mustn't even think that. A cry burst from her dust-choked throat. "I've got to get you out of here. I will!"

"Will? Will? Will? mocked the cavern chorus.

She fought down a spiraling terror. "Hank," she said firmly, "don't get stubborn now, or I'll fan your bottom when I do get you out. Push!"

"Push? Push? Push?" mimicked the soulless voices.

Kathy closed her eyes and stifled a sob, pressing her mouth against her outstretched arm. Then she felt the jagged rock pressing into her palm.

"You did it!" she cried. Let the derisive voices ring. Hank was free, wriggling toward her through the arch. "Give me your hands," she said, "both of them. Friend."

Hank squinted up at Michael when they reached the outside world. When the brisk young man boosted him over his shoulder, the boy's toothy smile appeared. "Is he your friend too, like me?"

Kathy met Michael's glance. In mere dots of time, it seemed, there flashed between them paragraphs of under-

standing, silent acknowledgment of the fear they had shared that Hank would never see daylight again, followed by droll amusement at the small boy's casual acceptance of his miraculous escape.

"Michael Dunlop helped me find you," she said finally. "He was a very good friend. He certainly was!"

"Was?" echoed Michael, with no mockery, only promise, in his voice.

Trudging through the woods behind Michael and his chattering burden, Kathy fell to wondering about the understanding that had passed between them, in a flash and without words. Always she had thought this phenomenon reserved for people in love. She studied Michael's arrow-straight back. She liked him. She appreciated the way he had stood by her this afternoon. She hoped to see him again. Never, though, could she dream about Michael the way she had Bob Lansford.

The image of Bob petulantly refusing to leave the fair to look for a lost boy, burned in her mind still. Untouched, untrimmed, she added this mind snapshot to her album and firmly closed it.

Right through Labor Day the whole town talked of nothing but the rescue. As she wrote in answer to Michael's letter, "You're a hero, I'm a heroine, and Hank's a twentieth-century Columbus."

Everyone slender enough to view the underground wonder, declared it should be made accessible to all. The morning Kathy left for her sister's home in Floral City, a few enterprising citizens approached Mr. Parker about commer-

cializing "Hank's Cave" to arouse tourist interest, when the new highway went through. He agreed, and then returned to the carriage house to make one more long-distance call. Kathy knew how doggedly he was trying to hang on. "If I could only get another small contract to see us through the winter," she heard him say, but when her mother mentioned the big government contract again, he blustered from the room.

When she arrived at her sister's home, Kathy confessed the situation. Jane was quick to point out something Kathy herself was beginning to realize, that her "sacrifice" might be wasted. What guarantee was there that Dad would get that big contract even if he did have her education fund to fix up the old factory? And then, assuming he did, who could be sure that the new road would be through by spring so he could accept it?

Kathy sighed. "I know. That missing Weighlund cousin could ruin everything! Oh, Jane, what guide do you use for making such a decision? Your head? Your heart? The wheel of chance?"

"Why, you weigh all the facts, of course." Jane stopped tapping her fingers on the table. "I know how Mother would decide, with a boundless faith that everything turns out perfectly if you do what you feel in your mind and heart is right." She shook her head. "I can't believe in Mums' way. I wish I could."

Kathy understood what her sister meant. Their mother was unrealistic about a lot of things. Her family, for in-

stance. She honestly thought she had the best husband and the three nicest children in the whole wide world. Kathy suppressed a longing for some of Mums' unrealistic optimism. She, too, shook her head. "I know, Jane. Mums isn't very practical."

"Not for these times, anyway," said her sister. "Things are different now."

Are things so different now? That question plagued Kathy's first day of shopping at Finch's, from the shoe department to the College Corner, where she purchased two bulky sweaters which the salesgirl insisted were the rage at Upstate. On the way out the side door, a glassed-in case of porcelain figurines caught her eye. She bent to inspect a lustrously glazed fawn about four inches high. How Aunt Emily would love him for her collection, she thought.

"They're twenty-two dollars and up," said a voice behind her. "I can think of better ways to spend my money," the long-legged salesgirl went on, inspecting her scarlet nails, "but I'll get any you want to see out of the case. That's what I'm here for."

Kathy explained that she was just looking, and then admired a fragile china dinner set displayed against one wall. Tiered shelves in the wide windows next to it tempted both customers within and passers-by in the street outside with a gleaming array of silver teapots and trays.

"I suppose you think this is all very gorgeous," said the young salesgirl leaning against the counter. "You wouldn't, if you saw it every day."

"I guess I wouldn't," agreed Kathy, bending to inspect

the sterling silver flatware beneath the counter's glass top. "There's my friend's silver pattern," she commented, and then began wondering again whether Lucy had made her decision yet.

The girl had written to Mrs. Parker apologizing for her abrupt departure. In a later note to Kathy she had admitted increasing confusion. Kathy had omitted any advice in her brief reply. Not that she was angry at Lucy. She felt sorry for her, but torn as she was by her own dilemma she didn't feel qualified to help Lucy with hers.

The international incident which had so disturbed her friend was close to being settled in the chambers of the United Nations she and Lucy had visited last spring. But a new dispute was brewing, as usual. Outside pressures hadn't changed. Any change in Lucy's thinking must come from within her own mind, or Jim's.

Kathy looked out the window between the burnished teapot spouts, almost hoping to see her friend waving to her from the street. Then she realized that Lucy didn't know she had arrived in Floral City. She would call her this evening. She nodded to the sophisticated salesgirl and left the store.

# 13

"WHATEVER POSSESSED US JUST DIED OUT," EXPLAINED LUCY, "thanks to Celeste. First, Jim wanted to think it over. Remember? Then, by the time he caught the elopement fever again, I had calmed down. That's the way it went, back and forth, until both of us returned to normal again. Isn't it awful to think I might have been a married woman by now? One without a husband. Jim's at sea. I'd be a misfit everywhere. So would he."

"You don't mean," asked Kathy hesitantly, "that you and Jim don't love each other any more?"

"We're not absolutely sure. We understand each other better, though. We'll write and see each other when we can. Oh, for goodness' sake, there's plenty of time to decide about marriage. Now what about school? How many skirts do you have?"

Clothes were of little concern to Kathy. In fact, the two sweaters she had bought were bulking bad omens in her mind. They were going back to Finch's. She just knew it. Try as she would, she could not visualize herself scurrying across Upstate's campus this September. She was glad when

Lucy hung up. Time was running short. School started in two weeks. Lucy's problem was solved, but hers seemed thornier than ever.

Bob Lansford's telephone call a few minutes later solved her dilemma with painful finality.

"How did you know where I was?" she asked curtly when she heard his voice.

"That's a nice greeting," he replied. When she did not respond to the teasing tone of his voice, he explained.

"Your father called my father. My dad is away on a business trip this week, so I took the message. Then I asked for you. And, that's how I knew where you were. Now, how about seeing a movie tonight? Or we could go dancing at the beach hotel's Coral Roof. How about it?"

"What message did Dad leave for Mr. Lansford?" she asked, though she knew. With chilled certainty she knew.

Jane put down her sewing and moved slowly to Kathy's side. "You don't think—Dad wouldn't go back to working with him?" she whispered. Kathy shushed her sister and listened. When Bob confirmed their fear she nodded and Jane clenched both hands.

"No, no!" she cried.

"I knew Mr. Parker would take that position sooner or later," said Bob jauntily. "Now about tonight—"

"I can't, I'm sorry." The words seemed to come from someone else's lips. Kathy felt numb all over.

"Okay, but don't forget our football date in October. I'll write details. Give me the name of your dorm at Upstate."

She looked at her sister. I feel paler than she looks,

thought Kathy, now that I must face this head on, now that I've decided what I'm going to do, what I must do.

"I can't give you my dorm name, because—because I'm not going to Upstate this September."

She cradled the phone and walked to the corner mailbox with the two typewritten letters calmly enough. Not until the metal drop snapped over them irrevocably did the churning deep inside begin. She dashed back into her sister's house, raced into the guest room and threw herself across the bed. Jane came to the door and called. When Kathy did not answer, she entered. Tears choked her voice.

"Kitten, I was wrong this morning. Things aren't any different now. What you did was right and it won't be wasted. I know it won't be!"

From force of habit Kathy put on her pajamas and brushed her teeth. Then, knowing she shouldn't, but feeling compelled to anyway, she got out the orange frosh cap she had found in the hedge at Upstate last summer. She looked at it for a long time, then put it under her pillow. After she got into bed despair grew, encompassing her lost dream of Bob Lansford too. Though part of her knew it wasn't so, she felt as if she would never be happy again.

Much later Jane tapped on her door. When Kathy did not speak, she left her alone, alone to cry away the night.

After Lucy heard the news she kept saying, "You're only seventeen, so one year's delay won't really matter."

It did matter terribly, until her father telephoned two days later. Kathy found herself repeating Lucy's argument, one she had forgotten in the letter he had just finished read-

ing. "And I'll work for that year, Dad. I'll learn to manage my own money. That's important too," she insisted.

"You come home. At once!" he said.

"There are no jobs in Vickers Circle, so I'm staying with Jane."

"Get back up here and start packing for school!" he bellowed.

Then Jane joined in on the bedroom extension and bolstered her younger sister's arguments with a few of her own. "Aren't you proud of our Kathy, Dad?" she added. "Now you must follow through and get that government contract."

Kathy could hear her mother's voice in the background. "Jane is right. You simply cannot work for Mr. Lansford and you cannot give up what you've started here. Kathy is right too. You've got to stop wasting time trying to change her mind and call a contractor about those factory repairs."

Mr. Parker's grumbling continued. Kathy could picture him pulling off his glasses, polishing them on his sleeve, and then pushing them back on his nose again. Finally he succumbed. "No man can out argue three women at the same time. I give up!"

After returning the sweaters to Finch's, Kathy and Lucy entered the snack bar next door. Once seated, each opened a newspaper to the HELP WANTED page.

"Hmm, let's see." Lucy put her thumb to her lips. "You aren't a seamstress or a stenographer. What can you do?"

"Nothing, I'm beginning to think," sighed Kathy. " 'EXPERIENCED.' 'EXPERIENCED.' 'BEGINNER WITH SOME COLLEGE

CONSIDERED.' 'ONLY BUSINESS SCHOOL GRADUATE NEED APPLY,' " she read aloud.

"Give me the pencil." Lucy checked two addresses. "You know the alphabet, so you can file. You'd make a good trainee too. It doesn't say what for, but try it anyway."

Kathy never did find out what training the national concern planned for its chosen "trainees." The bare interviewing office gave no clue. Neither did the woman who spent an hour interviewing her. She first asked Kathy her age. Then followed a written test nearly as long as the college boards, a sight test, and finally a speech test. After all this, the woman fixed her with a sickish sweet smile and said, "I'm sorry. We don't consider applicants under eighteen."

By the time Kathy reached the other address Lucy had checked she was talking to herself. "She just wanted to look busy when her boss walked in! Wasting my time like that! Oooh!"

The billious green walls of this interviewing room added a touch of nausea to her irritated state. When she looked down the hall to the room where she would work and saw the same hideous color from ceiling to floor, she flunked the filing test.

"My dear," said the interviewer, "*U* comes before *V* you know." She patted Kathy's hand. "I'm afraid we can't use your services right now."

"I'm a little discouraged," Kathy admitted to Lucy on the telephone that evening.

"Take a day off and go shopping with me tomorrow. I've

decided to get one of those bulky sweaters at Finch's. Say, what about Finch's? Why not try for a job there?"

No sweet smile, no pat ended this interview, only a frank appraisal. "Though you have no experience you seem willing to learn. You're very young, but fortunately you didn't lie about your age. Finch's values honesty above all. You'll be handling expensive merchandise and hundreds of dollars every day."

"I will?" Kathy's blue eyes opened wide. "Have I got the job?"

The woman smiled and picked up the phone on her desk. "Mr. Braxton, I have a new girl for your floor. Will you send Miss Jones up, please?" Then she turned back to Kathy. "Report here tomorrow at nine. You'll be taught how to use a cash register and write out saleschecks for our charge customers." She looked up. "Here's Deirdre now. She'll show you around the silver and china department where you will be working."

Deirdre Jones draped one silken leg over the other and leaned against the door jam. "Sure I will. Come on."

Kathy followed the girl into the elevator. She had recognized her at once.

"I was in your department a few days ago," she said. Wouldn't it be strange, like sitting in the teacher's chair, to step behind one of Finch's counters. She remembered not being able to see over them. "I never thought then that I'd be working with you."

"Sure, I remember." Deirdre twirled one loop of the glass beads swinging from her neck and rolled her eyes.

"You were so enthralled by all that stuff I sell. Tell me what you think of it a week from today, will you?"

By that time Kathy knew what Deirdre meant. Every displayed piece of china had to be dusted each morning, every bit of tarnished silver polished.

Some customers were nice, some trying. Some were downright disagreeable. Kathy learned to take that too, stand up and take it, for only at lunch could she sit down. Never had she looked forward so much to just sitting. She couldn't help wondering if her arches had fallen and turned into little rockers, they ached so!

When a customer said, "Charge it," Kathy was glad. She liked writing saleschecks. First she asked to see the customer's coin which proved her a charge customer and she wrote down its number on the salescheck. Then she filled in the rest of the form, pressing hard so the carbon copy would be clear—date, department, customer's name, address, merchandise and price. The original of the salescheck went into the envelope clipped to her hard-covered sales book. The customer got the carbon to present in case of a return or exchange.

At closing time Mr. Braxton took all the girls' envelopes filled with originals up to the accounting department. "Don't let any get away," he often joked, "or the customer won't be billed for her purchase." There wasn't much chance of that, however, since each book's saleschecks were consecutively numbered.

In spite of the details involved, writing a salescheck was far easier than ringing up a cash sale to Kathy. That cash

register had a mind of its own, cracking its drawer against her hipbone when she hit the wrong key, spilling pennies all over when she reached for a bill.

"Oh, but it is fun, Jane," she insisted, "and I like Mr. Braxton, my boss. Deirdre has some queer ideas but she's all right too, I guess."

"How can you look so cheerful while you're polishing?" Deirdre complained one morning.

"I keep thinking how pretty it will look when I've finished."

"I don't. I keep thinking how many really exclusive places I could go with what this stuff costs."

Kathy held a teapot at arm's length. "This one is my favorite. It's shaped like Aladdin's lamp."

"Rub it harder then and get me a boy friend," said Deirdre, frowning over a chipped nail. "A rich one. I have two poor ones already."

A moment later she nudged Kathy. "Aladdin's genie works fast. Look what's headed this way. He has money. His clothes show it. He's good looking too."

Kathy glanced over her shoulder and then spun around. "Bob Lansford! What are you doing here?"

He grinned. "Your sister said you were working at Finch's. I had to see for myself. How about tonight for that date, Kath?" He leaned closer. "Hey, your father turned down my dad's offer after all. Was he put out! Whew!" He winked. "I won't hold that against you. It's not your fault. Now how about tonight?"

"I'm sorry. I can't," she said. His deep voice no longer

made her heart beat faster. Until then she hadn't realized how completely he had left her thoughts. For a moment she wished herself back in that rosy dream world, in love with love. "I'm sorry," she said again. She must tell Lucy that she had gotten over Bob Lansford at last.

Anger stained his cheekbones, but only briefly. He cocked his head at Deirdre. "Introduce me." When Kathy did, he bowed with exaggerated courtliness. "Miss Jones, are you free this evening? If so, wouldst care to go dancing?"

"I—I don't know." Deirdre glanced questioningly at her coworker, then said, "Sure, I'd be delighted."

A customer approached. Kathy went to wait on her. She did not see Bob leave. Both girls were kept busy the rest of the morning. After lunch Deirdre said bluntly: "I guess I shouldn't have accepted your boy friend's invitation. He probably asked me just to make you mad. Are you?"

"No, and he isn't my boy friend. Once I thought I was in love with him but that's over."

"Love? Who believes in that? Sure, I love my dogs. I love all dogs, even mutts. But people? Assuredly not!" She yawned and leaned against the glass-topped counter.

Kathy laughed. "You're joking. Animals are lovable, though. I have a horse."

Deirdre bored air disappeared. "You do? I have a cocker spaniel, a German shepherd and a beagle."

"That's funny. Dog owners usually stick to one breed."

The girl's mouth twisted. "Not me. I want each dog's individuality to stand out. I'm from a big family. I was always just one of a bunch. *They* my folks always called us,

or *the children.* I used to want to scream out, 'I'm me, me, not just part of *they!*' As soon as I could I got my own place and the dogs, three of them, each one different from the other."

Kathy took Deirdre's sudden switch from boredom to intensity in stride. She was never sure when the girl was only joking anyway. "It must be hard to feed them all on a salesgirl's salary."

"Sure, but at Finch's there are ways to supplement that salary." Deirdre's eyes rolled. "Ways for my two poor boy friends to take me expensive places too."

"I don't know what you mean."

"I knew you wouldn't, goody girl. That's why I said it." Deirdre's voice sounded sly and faintly tinged with contempt. Then she laughed and shook her head so vigorously the strands of her glass beads rattled together. "You take everything so seriously. I didn't mean anything. I was only talking to pass time."

She slid aside her sales book and pointed to the *Dog World* magazine beneath. "Except about the dogs. I meant what I said. I love 'em. If that sounds peculiar, if I have some unconventional ideas, blame it on my parents. They never loved me the way they should have."

Mr. Braxton appeared just then with their pay envelopes. "Do you think you can spend all that money before next week, Miss Parker?"

Deirdre's remarks were forgotten as Kathy accepted the small brown envelope. She had earned some money baby sitting, but this was her first honest-to-goodness pay check.

She smiled at Mr. Braxton. He was a genial, soft-spoken man. Instead of ordering people around, he suggested. "Suppose you count the flatware when you have time," he would say. Or, "Do you think you could tidy up that display this morning?" He was very understanding about mistakes too. Everyone on the floor liked him. Except Deirdre Jones. As she confided to Kathy, she didn't "fall for that smooth talk stuff."

Now Mr. Braxton smiled at her and slapped the counter. "Miss Jones, good news, I called our store in Manhattan. They have several place settings of Candleflame sterling. They're sending one out for that customer of ours. Odd though, I was so sure we had one setting here just a few days ago."

Deirdre shrugged.

"Another odd thing," Mr. Braxton went on, unsmiling now, "our city store had a place setting of Candleflame returned this very morning for a cash refund."

"What's so odd about that?" The girl shrugged again. "People are always changing their minds."

Mr. Braxton pursed his lips. "That's true, and of course Finch's never objects to refunding cash instead of credit for charged merchandise so long as a salescheck carbon is presented. The customer is billed accordingly at the end of the month."

He walked off a way and then came back. To Kathy he said: "Suppose you put that Rosemont tray back in the display window, Miss Parker. It's three days since that woman who admired it from the street telephoned and asked us to

hold it for her. Apparently she changed her mind. People do, as Miss Jones pointed out." He nodded to both girls and left.

Kathy took the Rosemont tray from the Hold cabinet and put it back on the shelf in the window. She puzzled over Mr. Braxton's manner. He seemed to have implied that there was something more than coincidental in that returned Candleflame silver. Then her thoughts flew to her pay check and the approaching lunch hour in which to spend it. She thought of the things she would buy. First, she must save out her board. She would insist that her sister take it.

By way of celebrating her first pay, she bought a scarf for Mums, handkerchiefs for her father and a record for Jane and her husband. Her brother, Steve, and his wife were bridge players, so she sent them a set of the new plastic cards. She next bought herself two pairs of stockings, a slip and a pair of high-heeled black suede shoes. Saved for last was a purchase she had been looking forward to all week, a flacon of French perfume.

However, by the time she reached the perfume department she had to be satisfied with a free squirt from the counter atomizer. Her money was almost gone. Unbelievable. When she had glibly talked of managing her own money, she hadn't known how unmanageable it could be.

The following day Deirdre did not mention her date with Bob Lansford and Kathy did not inquire. It didn't bother her, but it bothered one of Deirdre's boy friends.

Startled when she realized that the eyes looking through

the window were intent not on the wares displayed but on her long-legged coworker, Kathy whispered, "That fellow out there is staring at you. Do you know him?"

"Sure." Deirdre explained who he was. "He's been pestering me to go out. For a walk on the boardwalk. A walk! Can you imagine? He knows when I go to the beach it's the Coral Roof or nothing!"

"Probably he can't afford it. Few boys can," said Kathy. Deirdre's twisted outlook was getting on her nerves.

The girl shrugged. "He knows how he can if he wants to."

On Kathy's day off, Michael Dunlop telephoned again. She had already told him about her changed plans. He knew her keen disappointment. He sounded as though he disliked mentioning his own return to Upstate for fear it would make her feel bad all over again.

"You know how I wish you were going too, Kathy, but since you aren't—well, I was wondering. By the way, do your feet still hurt? The reason I called—you see, I was wondering if you'd care to go out somewhere Saturday night."

"Yes, I'd like to very much," said Kathy promptly.

Early Saturday morning the haunted eyes of Deirdre's boy friend appeared outside the store window again. He stood there for nearly an hour and then disappeared. Shortly after Kathy noticed him standing inside the door. Then a sudden rush of customers took her entire attention.

Silver sales soared. Mr. Braxton sent help from other departments. Kathy kept writing salescheck after salescheck for Finch's charge customers. Twice she had to run to the

cashier's desk and ask for a new salescheck pad. She rang up hundreds of dollars on the cash register too.

In her search for a china fruit bowl, Kathy had to squeeze behind Deirdre. She saw that at last the distraught boy friend had gotten up courage to come over. He was pretending to make a purchase so he could talk to Deirdre. It was pathetic, the pleading way he looked at her, thought Kathy.

"I want it for my aunt's birthday," he said, pointing to the Rosemont tray in the window.

Kathy found the china fruit bowl, but the customer decided against it, and so she had to squeeze behind Deirdre to put it back under the counter again. The wan boy friend hadn't been pretending after all, she saw. He had actually bought the Rosemont tray. He was charging it too. Deirdre slipped the tray in a flannel bag with the salescheck carbon, put it in a box and handed it to him with a businesslike, "Thank you, sir."

Sales did not taper off until nearly closing time. Mr. Braxton approached beaming. "A wonderful day's work, girls. Silver and china must have topped every other department." He looked up at the window shelves. "That Rosemont tray went today. I wonder if that woman who first admired it was the one who bought it. She might have mentioned it. Do you know, Miss Jones. Didn't you take it out of the window?"

"Not me," said Deirdre quickly. "One of the girls who came over to help sold it." She went back to counting the money in her cash drawer.

Kathy shot her a startled glance. Deirdre was lying. Why? She looked up to see Mr. Braxton studying the girl's profile. He looked so worried. He too knew that Deirdre was lying, Kathy realized. She couldn't tell whether he knew why, any more than she. Perhaps the girl was again just talking to make time pass. Certainly she seemed to be eying the clock. On the dot of six she thrust the *Dog World* magazine into her purse and hurried for the door.

That evening Michael was in a festive mood. "I have two tickets for the Boardwalk Playhouse. Considering your aching arches I thought that would be better than dancing at the Coral Roof." He smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I couldn't afford it anyway."

Kathy went off with him, feeling gayer than she had in weeks, and prettier. Her hair had grown long enough to twist into a high glossy knot. The new dress, her first black one, fitted to perfection, and the pearl earrings added just the right touch. The French perfume was hers at last. Touching her wrists with one tiny drop of it gave her such a luxurious feeling. She looked forward to a wonderful evening.

It was wonderful. She and Michael laughed at the same things most of the time. Harmony remained when they didn't. He pointed out the functional good looks of the buildings along the beach. She scanned the lapping waters of the inlet.

"That's where the ships used to sneak in with cargo to escape the British taxes. See them slacken their sails and glide in under cover of night?"

"No," he said.

They locked arms and smiled at their difference. At dinner they discovered a mutual enthusiasm for Brussels sprouts and a shared loathing of whipped-cream desserts.

The play wasn't very good, but it didn't seem to matter. Resuming small talk, they left the theater as happily as they had entered. It was then that Kathy saw Deirdre Jones standing before the Coral Roof entrance. Kathy saw her pat her hair and beckon to her escort—the haunted-looking boy friend who knew how to take her to expensive places if he really wanted to.

# 14

OCTOBER WAS ENDING. EVERYTHING WAS DYING. WARMTH, not shade, would soon be needed. Smoke from the burning leaves in front of her sister's house curled upward with slow dignity, proud banner of a job well done.

Kathy felt much the same way at the moment, having given up two days off to meet the winter wedding rush in Finch's silver and china. Now those two days, plus Sunday, would give her a long, well-deserved week end. Early tomorrow she would leave for Vickers Circle.

She watched her brother-in-law rake more of last summer's leaves into the low crackling flames. Overhead and across the street hardy maples still clung to most of their brilliance. Floral City was lovely in the fall. She wondered about the mountains. In summer they rolled across the western horizon with such even blue serenity. But their oaks and maples must be changing color too. Could you see them from the driveway behind the cottage? Did Mums and Dad still walk by the creek evenings? Or was it too cool up there now?

A sudden biting breeze swept smoke into her eyes. As

swiftly pain struck somewhere beneath her heart. She ran into the house calling, "Jane! Please help me pack. I'm leaving for home tonight."

Next morning when she looked out her bedroom window and saw the mountains, she clasped her hands over her blanketed knees. To be an Emily Dickinson for just a little while. If only she could write poetry! She reached for her robe and slid out of bed. At her desk she tapped her chin with the pencil, looked out her window, and tapped her chin again. *Ancient hills of Indian lore,* she wrote, then scratched it out. She watched the mountain mosaic brighten and shadow, according to the whimsy of clouds drifting past the rising sun.

"Unchanging hills," she had called them last June. How wrong she had been. Yet beneath the magnificent autumn tapestry—of gold, orange, scarlet, delicate gradations of violet and bold splotches of hemlock green—the rippling contours remained the same. The mountains had changed cloaks, adapted to the season as they did to light and shadow. That was all. Did people only adapt too? Did everyone lovingly guard something deep within? Perhaps. Maybe everyone had Deirdre's thought, "I'm me, me, not just part of they," at some time or another.

She threw down her pencil. Whether you could write poetry or not, you couldn't help wondering about things. But here it was, a crisp clear morning, perfect for riding. She dressed quickly. After belting her jeans she thought, "One thing's certain. Domino hasn't changed." She let a handkerchief hang from her back pocket just enough to

make him think he was putting one over, and hurried downstairs.

There was so much to tell, so much news to catch up on. When Kathy returned from her ride she followed her mother on her round of household duties, talking all the while. After lunch Dad took her to see the factory. It was nearly ready for that government contract when and if his bid was chosen. The route to Clovedale was ready for the bulldozers too. In their spare time the men of the Circle had ripped up the old railroad spur.

"Mrs. Weighlund is still searching for Guy's cousin," said Mr. Parker. "Guy has been interviewing possible employees for me. That's kept him hopping." When Kathy laughed, he nodded. "I know what you're thinking. No Weighlund hops, ever. Guy's a good man, though. Reliable."

At Aunt Emily's she had tea. Celeste poured and little Joan Emily passed the cake. Aunt Emily, like Mrs. Parker, had no doubts that "everything would turn out perfectly." With enthusiasm she went on to tell Kathy of plans for her miniature museum. "Next spring I'm opening it to the public. Hank's cave will help perk up tourist interest too. Then, with the factory going again"—she patted her great-granddaughter's soft little hand—"wait and see. Before my darling grows up, Vickers Circle will be back in the atlas once more."

Celeste seemed happily content in the big house. Apparently Dr. Nilson called often. "Grammer," she chided affectionately, "you know what Brandley said about an over-

dose of great-grandmother love." She laughed and turned to Kathy. "That reminds me. Hank has a new hobby, lizards. If he offers you a present, look first."

Kathy missed dropping in the library to see Miss Sands who was, of course, back at Upstate. However, Mrs. Parker reported that the assistant professor's thesis had been accepted for publication.

"I'm glad. She must be happy," said Kathy. Then, while she set the dinner table, she chattered on again about the store, their former neighbors in Floral City, and the gay evening with Michael Dunlop.

Mrs. Parker broke in. "I almost forgot. Bob Lansford telephoned last evening shortly before you arrived. He said he'd call again tonight about the football game tomorrow. He's driving down to get you in the morning."

Kathy almost dropped the plates. "Football game?"

"Why, yes. I thought you must know. He seemed to know you would be up here this week end. Haven't you been writing?"

"No, but I guess I know how he knew I was here," said Kathy thoughtfully. "A girl who graduated with us, and who goes to Pensington too, was in the store last Saturday. She was down for the week end." Kathy didn't mention her blues during the girl's eager account of college life. "I guess I must have—yes, I did tell her about coming up here." She put down the plates. "She must have told Bob. Oh, rats!"

"If you don't want to go, don't," said Mrs. Parker, unable to hide her satisfaction.

"I promised. Last Fourth of July I promised." How long ago that seemed.

"Oh, that's different," said her mother.

Kathy sighed. "Remember last spring? I never thought then that I'd ever be wishing I hadn't promised to go out with Bob Lansford."

Once the band marched onto the football field it was hard to wish she hadn't promised. Football games were so colorful, such fun. Stepping high, the drum majorettes circled the field, their twirling batons glinting in the sharp October sunlight.

Kick off! Kathy jumped to her feet. Slowly Bob rose to his. He was gloomy about something. Something trivial, she was sure. A few months ago his dismal manner would have troubled her, as would his ridiculing remarks about various other spectators seated nearby. Now it concerned her not at all. Why? Perhaps when you were in love with someone, or thought you were, his hopes and disappointments were yours. His mistakes were yours too. You wanted to be proud of him and felt awful when he made it impossible.

When Pensington captured the ball she joined the swelling demand for a "Touchdown! We want a touchdown!" She looked at Bob. His sulk had deepened.

Kathy turned to the game. The crowd's fervor was contagious. She joined in the roar when Pensington gained, groaned when they didn't.

At the half, Bob revealed the cause of his anguish. "I can't even buy us hot dogs, Kath. I asked Dad to wire more money but he refused. His company appointed a new super-

visor for that project he wanted your father's help on. If Mr. Parker—well, it's too late now. Anyway, Dad had to take a cut in salary, and is he cranky about money these days!" Bob pressed his knuckles under his chin and frowned.

Kathy wished she could feel sorrier about Mr. Lansford's misfortune, but after all it was slight compared to the losses her father had suffered, partly because of him. "I'm too excited to eat anything, Bob," she said. She pointed to the crowd on the other side of the stadium. "They're spelling out WIN! WIN! with big white cards. Now Pensington is going to cheer. Oh, Bob, stand up. Cheer! It's your school."

At the beginning of the last quarter Bob agreed that it was a pretty good game."I wanted to go some place afterward though."

"Forget that. I'm having fun. You should be too. Pensington is going to win. Look at that halfback go!"

Pensington did win. Some of Bob's classmates rushed over and pounded his back in happy exultation. "See you in class Monday?" asked one as he left. "Or are you taking another of those long week ends?"

In the car, driving back to Vickers Circle, where Mums had dinner waiting, Kathy mentioned something that had puzzled her. "Can you take days off in college?"

"If you want," said Bob. "No one has said anything about my cuts. The professors don't seem to care."

"Won't you care later on? How can you pass the exams?"

Bob lifted one eyebrow. "I'll worry about that next January."

When Kathy returned to work Monday morning, tiny white gauze angels with round paper faces and gilt wings were fluttering over every one of Finch's counters. Laurel framed the windows. Deirdre wore a sprig of holly on her shoulder.

"Here," she said, "pin it on and get ready. Christmas is coming."

"Thanksgiving hasn't arrived yet," Kathy protested.

Deirdre shrugged. "In a department store Christmas starts before Thanksgiving." She jerked her pencil at the angel overhead. "A few weeks after these start flying the temporaries arrived. They come in just for the Christmas rush. Talk about angels, some of them are really out of this world. There's one—" she rolled her eyes "—if she comes back again this year, you'll meet her soon enough."

The morning after Thanksgiving Kathy didn't feel much like working. She had driven up to Vickers Circle and back with Jane and her husband. Mums had kept piling their plates with more turkey, more potatoes, more everything, exclaiming again and again: "I knew your father would get that government contract. Why wouldn't he, with his sterling reputation? I knew it all along." Caught up in the excitement of Dad's triumph, they had all eaten too much and stayed later than they should have.

Instead of bustling from the locker room, Kathy felt like curling up in one of the lounge chairs outside the employees' lunchroom. Certainly her mood didn't match that of the plump little woman approaching. Her step was energetic, her round face wide awake.

"Miss Parker?" she chirped. When Kathy nodded, she peeled off her fuzzy white coat. "I'm to share your locker. Hope you don't mind." She rummaged through a lumpy drawstring bag and pulled out a white smock. "For the Christmas rush I always do the dustin' and polishin' in Finch's silver and china," she explained, buttoning the smock over her dress.

Kathy smiled and thrust out her hands. The nails had become brittle from silver polish. "What a lovely surprise. I'm so tired of polishing, Miss—Mrs.—"

"Call me Gertrude," said the woman. "Everybody here does." Her round face crisscrossed with merry little wrinkles. "Except Mr. Braxton. He calls me Finch's Herald Angel, because when I arrive he knows Christmas is really comin' again." Her wrinkles danced. "That's what he says every year."

Mr. Braxton didn't disappoint her this year.

Later, while Gertrude was busy across the room, Deirdre said to Kathy, "Look at her work. She doesn't have to either. She comes here every year for the atmosphere. She's just crazy about Christmas, and I mean demented. What she earns at Finch's goes for this special gift of hers."

"For someone in her family?" asked Kathy. No one else in the store seemed to think Gertrude was crazy. They clustered around her, hugged and kissed her, laughed at her chirpy remarks. Something close to the Christmas spirit filled the store.

"No," said Deirdre, "this special gift goes to a stranger, a different person each year." She rolled her eyes. "To

someone who loves Christmas as much as she does, as I understand it."

Both girls jumped when Mr. Braxton spoke. They hadn't known he was near. "Miss Jones," he said, "suppose you get those bowls from the stock room now, while things are quiet."

After Deirdre left, he said to Kathy, "Please don't question Gertrude about what Miss Jones just told you. It might embarrass her."

"Oh, I won't," promised Kathy. "I'm dying to know who will get that special gift though."

Mr. Braxton smiled. "Everyone wonders, every year. One time it was a little girl with a jar full of pennies and a longing to give her mother the vacuum cleaner she always hoped to find under the Christmas tree. Santa Claus brought that vacuum, with Gertrude's help. Then another time—" He broke off as Gertrude came running over.

"Mr. Braxton, where'd this cunnin' little fella come from?" She held up the porcelain fawn.

"All the way from Italy, and he's the only one we have in either store. I know you'll dust him gently, Gertrude." He smiled and sauntered off.

"Only yesterday I was telling my parents about that fawn." Kathy described Aunt Emily's porcelain collection. "My mother thought it would be just the gift for Aunt Emily, but Dad wants to get something more useful." She laughed. "Mums will probably win. I hope the fawn isn't sold before then."

Gertrude whispered, "I'll keep him 'way, 'way back on the shelf where the customers won't see him."

Early the next morning Kathy entered the lunchroom. Rather than disturb her sister, she always had breakfast in the store on Saturdays. Almost everyone did.

Mr. Braxton and Gertrude sat at one table. Kathy joined Deirdre who sat alone, studying a beagle's picture in her *Dog World* magazine while she sipped coffee. Without looking up, Deirdre said in a dull, flat tone, "Now a Community College sophomore has joined Finch's growing horde of Christmas temporaries. Take a peek over at the corner table."

Kathy stole a glance from beneath her lashes, then clapped her hands and cried out, louder than she intended, "Why, it's Santa Claus!"

Obviously displeased, Santa Claus drained his coffee cup and unfolded into a towering height. He brushed pastry crumbs from the snowy fur on his crimson tunic and tightened the wide black belt over his fake avoirdupois. "Uh! Santa Claus! Maudlin symbol of Christmas," he declared, snapping curly white whiskers over his chin.

The startled attention caused by his remark seemed to encourage him. He went on, "Through the manipulation of symbols this so-called Christmas spirit is engendered. The public is urged to buy for Christmas, give for Christmas." He tucked in his chin, whiskers and all. "Or go home for Christmas! As though a person couldn't spend Christmas anywhere except home! Mass hypnosis, that's what it is." He thumped past the tables and left the room.

Kathy saw that Mr. Braxton's mouth hung slack. Deirdre too seemed shocked. "Some Santa Claus he is!" she exclaimed.

Only Gertrude remained unruffled. "He's a smart boy. It took a lot of thinkin' to figure all that out. A lot of thinkin'."

# 15

"YES, THE ALADDIN'S LAMP TEAPOT," REPEATED DEIRDRE. "The customer saw it in the window last night. He wants it for his wife's Christmas gift. He telephoned and asked us to hold it until he arrives. I offered to send it, but he has no charge account."

Kathy looked at the teapot and put her hand to her cheek.

"What's the matter?" asked Deirdre. "Oh, I know. You don't want to part with your favorite." The girl hunched her shoulders. "Our cynical Santa Claus has annoyed me often these past two weeks, but I think he's right. People do get too sentimental at Christmastime, about everything, even teapots!"

"No. That isn't it," said Kathy. "Oh, it's too long a story to tell now. My father is looking for a man named Weighlund, you see. Did the man you spoke to spell out his name?"

"It's the same spelling!" she cried when Deirdre showed her the notation. "It's an unusual name. There's not one in the phone book. It could be the one! Please, if I'm at lunch

when he comes in, get his address. It's very important. I'll tell the other girls and Mr. Braxton too."

Days went by and Mr. Weighlund failed to appear. Mr. Braxton asked Kathy to put the Aladdin's lamp teapot back in the window and it was promptly sold. Soon she was telling her genial boss the whole involved story.

"It must be the one we're looking for," she said. "He acts like a true Weighlund, slow as molasses in January. That's probably when he'll come in for his wife's Christmas present." She relented. "Weighlunds are reliable though. He'll be in—someday."

"Then I'll order one from our city store," said her boss.

Kathy shot him a saucy look. "Make him sign that road release first, will you, Mr. Braxton?"

One evening the following week Kathy stormed into the house, eyes ablaze. Her sister smiled knowingly. "Have you been fighting with Santa Claus again?"

"Yes, I have!" She pulled off her coat and bounced into the nearest chair. "A year and a half of college and he thinks he knows everything! Self-realization was his topic for today."

"That simply means making the most of the talents God gave you," said her sister.

"Then why didn't he say so?" Her small chin jutted. "Oooh! And when he talks about Christmas he's insufferable!" In a deep pompous voice she mimicked, "I have convinced my parents and my girl that I've no time for the ritualistic sentiments of our culture. I'll not join the tribal rush for home on Christmas Eve."

Jane laughed. "Well, the Parker tribe will gather right here. I received a letter from Mother today. She and Dad are driving down. Steve and his wife are flying." She pulled a check from her apron pocket. "Mums wants you to buy that porcelain fawn for Aunt Emily." Then she nodded toward the mantel. "Another letter from Michael arrived. I suppose you'll be seeing him during his Christmas vacation."

"I suppose." Kathy smiled mischievously.

Jane's curiosity about Michael amused her. Her sister scented a romance blossoming. That was silly. She and Michael were just good friends.

Michael proved his friendship again ten days later. It was he who discovered the porcelain fawn in the window of Finch's city store.

Kathy had seen Michael several times since his return from Upstate. She had mentioned her chagrin upon discovering that the fawn had been sold. Gertrude had been mystified.

"That little fella was there last night," she insisted the morning Kathy arrived prepared and eager to buy Aunt Emily's gift.

None of the salesgirls, either regular or temporary, remembered selling the four-inch figurine. Since it was Deirdre's day off they couldn't ask her. But the following day she arrived glowing after a "gorgeous date with my other boy friend" and declared that she couldn't remember selling it either. Mr. Braxton had inquired at the wrapping desk whether anyone remembered packing it. The girl there threw up her hands.

"We're so busy, who can remember anything?"

That was the answer, Mr. Braxton decided, until Michael telephoned Kathy at the store from a booth in Manhattan.

"The girl promised to hold it while I called you," said Michael. "I have enough money with me. Shall I buy it?"

"You never saw the fawn. It might not be the same kind. I don't know what to say."

Kathy began to perspire. Customers were milling around. They were so rushed. Even Mr. Braxton was helping behind the counter. When he walked over with a cash sale she told him about Michael's find.

"You said there was only one like it, Mr. Braxton."

"I could be mistaken," he said slowly. Then he stood very still, his fingers poised above the cash register. "Wait. Ask your friend not to buy it. I'll call and tell them to hold it for me. I've just decided to go into the city myself tomorrow. Don't worry. I'll get your fawn, Miss Parker. I want to find out something first."

True to his word, Mr. Braxton brought in the fawn the following afternoon.

"Oh, it is exactly like the one we had here," cried Kathy.

"It's the very same one," he said, turning to include Deirdre in the conversation. "It was bought here and returned to our city store for a cash refund."

Deirdre shrugged. "People are always changing their minds."

"For once I'm glad they do," said Kathy.

In view of the happy outcome she wondered about Mr. Braxton's frown. The next day, on her way to the lunch-

room, she saw him leaning across the personel director's desk. He seemed acutely disturbed.

"Let's not make a big thing of it," he said. "No, I told you, I have no idea who, only how, and I reported that to the city store manager. The charge sale is written up on a hidden pad of saleschecks. The carbon is given with the purchase, as usual, but the original destroyed. That's why the accounting department had no record of the sale."

As she turned the corner in the hall, she heard him say, "Keep it quiet, please. It probably won't happen again."

Some accounting error, she decided, and wasn't it like her boss to be so understanding. Mr. Braxton was forgotten as Kathy started another battle with Santa Claus.

He was in the lounge, his shoulder blades resting in one chair, his long booted legs draped over another. His whiskers and stomach cushion occupied yet another.

"Hmm, I see you've made a little group all by yourself. Have you lost your audience?" Kathy brushed past, head held high.

He bristled, slid to his feet and followed her into the lunchroom. "Now listen," he began.

"I won't," she said over her shoulder. Among the crowd she glimpsed the puffed sleeve of Gertrude's white smock. She hurried over and sat down beside her.

"Join us, Santa Claus," said the plump little woman.

"Thank you, I will." His thin neck rose proudly from his fur collar. "You're the only one who understands me."

"That I do." Gertrude's soft wrinkles danced merrily.

"Miss Parker considers me sinister," he went on, "simply

because I've been talking rationally and logically about the so-called Christmas spirit. The customs of our culture—"

Gertrude patted his crimson shoulder. "I know. Customs like singin' about the Babe of Bethlehem on Christmas Eve, trampin' back through the snow to trim the tree, hangin' up your stockin'."

Santa began to choke. "Those whiskers shed and get in my throat," he explained.

Gertrude pushed a glass of water toward him. "Where would you be singin' and hangin' up your stockin', if you believed in such things, I mean."

He took another sip of water. "I come from Des Moines, Gertrude. It's not much of a flight. I could go home, but I simply will not take part in this annual, ritualistic—"

Gertrude interrupted with an understanding nod. "Ritualistic gathering of the clan on Christmas Eve."

"That's right!" said Santa Claus.

Kathy glared. "Oooh! You take my appetite away. I'm going shopping." She jumped up and scraped her chair under the table. "Christmas shopping!"

That evening Lucy called again to tell more enthusiastic tales of campus life. Ever since college vacation started, the girls had done most of their visiting by telephone. Kathy was pushed for time. She didn't see Bob Lansford. She was either working late or out each time he called.

Michael picked her up in his old black sedan every evening during the last hectic week before Christmas.

One evening his parents took them to a dinner dance at The Sound Point Club. Kathy splurged a week's pay on a

white crepe dress with a scarlet sash. She was busy and happy. Not since she was ten had she so looked forward to Christmas. For the first time in her life all the gifts, wrapped and stacked beside her bed, had been bought with her own earnings.

On the morning of Christmas Eve the sky looked snowy. The air smelled icy. An expectant quiet filled the store, much like the happy hush on the last school day before summer vacation. There were few customers, Kathy was free to anticipate the nearing festivities.

Her sister's cookie cutter had been moving "squish-a-squosh" over a sheet of creamy dough when she left the house this morning. Her brother-in-law had been stringing colored lights around the Christmas tree. Steve had called from the airport. He and his wife would be there when Kathy returned this evening. Mums would be in the kitchen stirring something with a wooden spoon and trying to listen to everyone at the same time. Dad would be fixing. Something always came undone the last minute—the holly wreath on the door, or the decorations over the mantel. How wonderful it would be, all of them together again.

Lunchtime, Kathy did some last minute shopping. Her sister wanted more red candles for the table and fancy paper napkins for Christmas night when Michael and some of the Parkers' former neighbors dropped in for supper.

After purchasing these things, she went downstairs to the toy department. Hank had sent her an extremely original Christmas card, a crayoned drawing of his pet lizard.

Kathy had been touched, and grateful too that he hadn't sent the lizard. In return, she decided to buy him one of the space ships, complete with an intergalaxy compass, that she had seen a few weeks ago. Mother and Dad could take it back with them.

One space ship was left. She was lucky. Shelves were stripped. The white gauze angels smiled down on bare counters. Finch's toy department was cleaned out, but Santa Claus still slouched on his throne. While Kathy waited for Hank's gift to be wrapped, a little girl toddled over and looked up at the crimson-and-white figure with adoration.

"She should know that Santa the way I do," thought Kathy. Without so much as a nod his way, she picked up her purchase and left.

Mr. Braxton had open boxes of candy on his desk. The girls munched and visited the rest of the afternoon.

"Only minutes to go," said Deirdre, popping a caramel into her mouth.

Kathy looked around. "The temporaries have left already. Where's Gertrude? I wonder who got her special gift? Who did she decide loves Christmas as much as she?"

"Who knows, who cares?" Deirdre eyed the clock and pulled her coat from beneath the counter. "No locker room for me tonight. Time's up! Merry Christmas, Kathy. Merry Christmas, everyone!" She hurried out the door.

The locker room was deserted. Deirdre hadn't been the only one to keep her coat under the counter tonight. Kathy was searching for her key when she heard a peculiar shuf-

fling noise in the lounge. She listened. No, it was someone sniffling, or crying. Crying, on Christmas Eve? She tiptoed over and peeked in the door. At first she didn't recognize the lanky figure hunched in the big chair. But when he took the handkerchief away from his face she asked softly, "Santa Claus?"

He nodded and blew his nose. "Look here," he held out a small white envelope, "I found this round trip airline ticket in my locker. I know who put it there. Gertrude." His voice cracked. "She knew I talked the way I did because I couldn't afford to go home for Christmas. She knew."

Kathy shook her head, bewildered. How could anyone have guessed that? It seemed humanly impossible.

Santa Claus, stripped of his red robe and whiskers, his fake stomach and fake philosophy too rose up and yelled: "I can't miss that flight. I've got to be home in time to put the star on top of the tree. I always do." He patted Kathy's blonde head as he rushed by. "Merry Christmas! A very Merry Christmas!"

At her locker Kathy swallowed against a sudden catch in her throat and grabbed her coat. Gertrude, she saw, had forgotten something. The puffed sleeves of her white smock curved over the hanger like angel wings.

# 16

JANUARY 31 SHOULD BE THE END OF THE YEAR, MUSED Kathy. It ended so much—all traces of the gay party season, including her birthday, all college winter sessions, and every hope that spring would ever come again. Little hope remained that Mr. Weighlund would ever appear either.

Mr. Parker, rather than forfeit the contract, was about to borrow heavily to run a crude road along the old railroad route.

"The other Weighlund could come back and make me rip up the part on his property. That isn't likely. However, that's a risk the highway commissioner isn't permitted to take with public funds, so I'll have to do it," he had told her over the telephone. Dad would be burdened with a huge debt for years. All because of a missing cousin. Was everything turning out for the best? Kathy's dim view of things grew dimmer.

"I know a cure for your midwinter blues," said her sister. "Come along with me and register for an evening course at Community College."

"Oh, I don't know," said Kathy listlessly.

"You had better decide soon. Classes fill up quickly."

Jane paused at the door. "Seeing Michael off to camp tomorrow doesn't add to your gay mood either, does it? I like him. I suppose you'll keep writing to each other?"

"Oh, I suppose." Kathy began flipping through a magazine.

Among the churning crowd in the railway station, a flowered hat bobbed here and there. But the smells were winter smells, from woolens wet with melted snow, rubber boots, and medicated cough drops.

Michael left Kathy at the gate and wended his way to the information booth. When he turned and started back she stood on tiptoes and watched his winding approach through the crowd. Something strange began happening. Michael looked different. His brown hair was as short and crisp as ever, his posture as erect. Still, he looked different.

Uneasy, she hugged her coat collar closer. Different? How? Why? She recalled the painting of a congested market place she had seen in an art museum last year. Near by hung an enlarged photograph of one minor figure in that painting. Detail invisible to the naked eye was revealed. Every painstaking stroke of the master's brush showed. After seeing it, she had viewed the entire work again and that minor figure, newly dimensioned in her eyes, had dominated the canvas. That's the way Michael appeared to her now. His face was warm-toned and clear against a gray crowd.

For some reason, shyness overtook her when he finally reached her side.

"We have time for a hot chocolate," he said. His voice

sounded different too, and it seemed she could feel the warmth of his grasp through her coat and sweater when he drew her aside to make way for a rumbling baggage cart.

Usually she slipped her arm through his with companionable ease. Now, both hands clutching her purse, she walked stiffly beside him. They sipped chocolate in silence. He seemed as restrained as she.

"You don't have to go out to the platform," he said huskily, when they reached the gate again.

She insisted. Walking along beside him, she wondered what had happened to their casual, carefree friendship. When she forced herself to speak, she found herself parroting her sister.

"I suppose we'll keep writing, won't we?" Oh, why couldn't she think of some bright parting remark!

The train whistle screamed. The engine chugged louder. Michael drew her close and gave her a quick hard kiss. Then he stepped back, his arms falling to his sides, and looked at her for an intense second before turning to enter the vibrating train.

On her way back to the Long Island train platform, Kathy stole a glance in a gum-machine mirror. Her hair hung in long soft curves, just as she had brushed it this morning. The new face powder she had bought at the store still covered the fading freckles on her nose. Her lipstick was even. She looked the same, but felt not the same at all. Michael's kiss lingered. Could it be—could this be the beginning of love, real love?

During the next few days Lucy must have sensed some

change. Relentless as a reporter after headline news, she came into the store to ask again, "How much do you like him? You must know." She counted on her fingers. "For goodness' sake, you've known Michael Dunlop over six months now."

Kathy continued rubbing the teapot on the counter. "I told you last night, and the night before, we're good friends."

That was true. They were. Why hadn't she realized that was the best beginning real love could have? Now she knew how Celeste must have felt. Rather than lose Michael, Kathy was sure she would give up college, give up everything, and marry him tomorrow. Michael wouldn't ask that she realized, and that made her love him more. And she knew she couldn't bear to see him change into a frightened purposeless young man like Johnny Vickers because of responsibilities he wasn't prepared for as yet. She loved him too much for that.

She looked at Lucy. Lucy was so sincerely interested. Kathy valued her friendship as much as ever. She wished she could tell her what she wanted to know. That would mean telling how her awareness of love had started in the railway station. Never could she share that unique experience with anyone, except Michael, sometime in the misted future, she hoped. He might not feel the same way. He might never feel the same way about her. That realization, that fear invaded her continuous thoughts about him more and more. This was something she could not confide either.

It was all too precious to talk about. That made her wonder about Lucy and Jim. Lucy talked so freely about the new steadiness of their relationship. Was that love? Of course, you could never really tell how another person felt. No love was exactly like another. That was the wonder. She knew, though, that she couldn't talk about her love. Last year no secret was too precious for her friend to share. Sadly, she realized this was no longer so. Must every new beginning be bittersweet?

Kathy put the polished teapot in the window. A familiar face peered in at her through the window. "Deirdre!" She laughed, relieved by the diversion, and turned to her friend. "Look, it's Deirdre with her dogs. She parades them on her day off."

Lucy walked to the window. "Yes, you wrote about her. She's the girl who loves dogs, but assuredly not people." However, Lucy would not be diverted. "Are you sure you're not a teeny bit in love with Michael?" she asked, measuring with her fingers.

"You'll miss the bus back to Upstate if you don't hurry," said Kathy.

Lucy tapped her toe. "Yes, I'm going." She pulled on her mittens. "By the way, did you hear about Bob Lansford? He flunked out of Pensington. You'll probably see him around. I hear he's going to some prep school in the city. Well, good-by. Write and tell me everything."

The news about Bob wasn't too surprising. Kathy's first reaction was, "Serves him right for cutting class." Then she was sorry. Bob had looked forward to college as much as

she. When he telephoned the following evening she listened sympathetically.

"What makes me mad," he said, "is that I could have passed if I'd had nerve enough to bring some answers into class. Three guys did and only one got caught." He grumbled. "I thought about it for three whole days before the exam, then got cold feet the last minute."

"You couldn't have done that," she said matter-of-factly.

"I wish I had!" He shot back. "In my spot, I suppose the upright, noble Katherine Parker wouldn't have been tempted to cheat just a little!"

"You make me sound like a—a goody girl," she retorted angrily. "But I wouldn't cheat, no!"

"Why not? Afraid of getting caught?"

"No. That isn't it." She hesitated, then added, "To tell the truth, it wouldn't occur to me. It just wouldn't enter my mind, that's all."

After a pause Bob said: "I didn't call to pick a fight, Kath. How about going out tonight? To a cheap movie. Dad's cut my allowance to the bone." When she said she'd be busy he sighed. "Okay," and hung up.

Early one morning the following week he appeared in the store. Kathy had been examining a long scratch across the bottom of a silver-plated tray. It was such a pretty tray. It seemed a shame to send it downstairs to the *Damaged* bin. Some customer might want it enough to overlook the damage which was, after all, on the bottom where it wouldn't show.

"Deirdre," she said, "I'm putting this scratched tray back

on the table after all." She turned to find Bob at her side.

When he asked her out again, Kathy was glad of a bona fide excuse. He looked so depressed she might have given in. "I'm sorry. Night courses start at Community College this evening. I'm going to sign up, if I can still get in."

For a moment his old jaunty manner returned. "You'll always be too busy for a date with me from now on, won't you?" Without looking at Deirdre, he added: "Miss Jones wouldn't be interested in a cheap movie. She said as much when I took her to the Coral Roof last year."

Deirdre walked over, smiling. Kathy didn't hear her answer. Just then Mr. Braxton called her into his office about price changes for the coming sales.

When Kathy returned to the counter some fifteen minutes later, Bob was gone and Deirdre was studying the cover of *Dog World's* latest issue. "Guess what?" she commented. "Someone did come in and buy that tray, scratch and all."

Kathy folded her arms. "I turn my back and you get the one customer for today. It's so slow. Doesn't anyone buy silver and china after Christmas? I'll be glad when the sales begin."

Night school seemed an excellent idea after the dragging day. Kathy walked over to Community College after dinner. Registration for English literature was closed. She looked at the openings posted on the bulletin board. Chemistry, advanced mathematics—oh, no! Introduction to psychology? That should be interesting. She filled out the form and paid her tuition.

In the classroom she listened to psychology defined as

"the scientific study of behavior, both human and animal." That did sound interesting. The professor was likable. Seemingly his string of degrees impressed everyone but himself. She settled back comfortably.

Then the professor began drawing the class into his discussion of motivation and Kathy froze, aware all at once that she was in college sitting before a professor. Soon it would be her turn to answer his question, "Why are you here? What motivated you to enroll in this psychology course?"

Everyone in the room seemed to share her apprehension. In tight nervous voices they spoke up one by one. "I thought it might help me in my work." "Because I—I need the four credits."

Because, because—frantically Kathy searched for her answer. Why was she here? Because English literature was closed? Oh, she couldn't say that. Because her sister thought it would cure her midwinter blues? How featherbrained that would sound. The young man next to her was answering. What, oh what, could she say?

The professor looked at the top card in his hand and smiled at her. "Miss Parker?"

She fingered the pearls around her neck and they broke, bouncing in every direction.

"Oh!" she cried during the laughing scramble that followed. "I don't know why I'm here!" She pressed her palms to her flaming cheeks.

"Miss Parker, thank you," said the professor kindly. "Your lively pearls have eased the tension and your answer is a good one."

When the room quieted down, he addressed the entire class. "Follow up an 'I don't know' with 'I'll try to find out' and you'll never be bored. Never. Life is one glorious question after another. Not to ask, not to wonder is mere existence."

Kathy left Community College well pleased with her last-minute choice.

The next afternoon Bob Lansford telephoned her at the store. He had to see her that evening, he said. This was no invitation to a movie, she knew. He was deeply disturbed about something. She told him to wait for her outside of Finch's.

"No," he answered. "I won't go near that place. Meet me in the ice-cream store next to the high school."

After work she walked to the crowd's old meeting place. Bob continued fumbling with the salt shaker on the table when she sat down opposite.

He cleared his throat. "I don't know how to begin." He looked around and whispered, "Finch's knows how Deirdre does what she does." Kathy must have looked blank. He leaned closer. "It started this way. She and I wanted to go someplace nice tonight, dancing and supper after. She knew I was broke, so she pretended to sell me that tray, yesterday, while you were in with the boss. She wrote up a salescheck on an extra pad she has."

Kathy slumped back against the cushioned bench. It was all too plain now what Deirdre had been doing. The fawn. The Rosemont tray. The Candleflame place setting, and how many other items.

Kathy nodded. "Deirdre tore up the original so the store

would have no record, didn't she? Then she gave you the salescheck carbon so you could get a cash refund for the tray at Finch's Manhattan store."

"That's right." Bob edged closer. "But they looked at the number on the carbon and knew it was phony right away. They must have been watching." He ran a finger inside his collar. "Whew! I must have been in that front office three hours. I must have answered a million questions. I stuck to my story, though. I told them I found the package in the subway. I couldn't tell on Deirdre."

"Bob, how could you get mixed up in something like this?"

"It didn't seem such a bad idea," he protested. "The tray was scratched, anyway. Deirdre showed me. Besides, the store is covered by insurance for losses like that." He waited until the waitress was out of earshot. "I didn't dare call Deirdre or go anywhere near the store." He looked over his shoulder. "Even though I turned in the tray and didn't get a cent, I feel as though someone is watching me all the time. But, Kath, I had to see you to warn you."

She frowned. "Warn me?"

"Yes. They know how it's done all right, but they're not sure who does it. You might be blamed. Quit Finch's now."

She straightened. "I will not!"

When he could not persuade her, he gestured helplessly. "All right, but you won't tell on Deirdre, will you?"

"No. Her stealing will lead to serious trouble sooner or later, but—no, I couldn't tell on her either."

"Stealing?" Bob looked as though she had dashed hot

coffee into his face. "You don't think I'd actually steal? I told you, the tray was damaged."

Kathy saw that his eyes shone with candor. Right now he honestly believed what he said. Before, though, he must have felt guilty. Someone seemed to be watching him, he had admitted. The truth was, Kathy realized, that Bob Lansford wasn't sure what he believed.

She remembered how Mr. Lansford had "transferred" accounts to secure a better position for himself. He had reasoned that the smaller business he shared with her father was sliding anyway. Here was Bob reasoning much the same. The tray was scratched and, besides, Finch's was covered by insurance.

Last spring Kathy recalled arguing that Mr. Lansford's actions were very understandable. Because he loved his family he wanted security, he wanted the best for them, she had said. Now she understood what her mother had meant when she insisted that Dad wanted real security, the only best, for those he loved.

Kathy knew she had the best. No wonder she didn't have to waste time and energy wondering whether it was all right to cheat on exams just a little, whether a scratched tray belonged to the owner as much as a perfect one. Poor Bob!

A glimmer of her old feeling for him returned. When it faded away, she knew it was gone for all time. She sipped her coffee and squeezed her eyes shut. Why were all endings so sad?

"I guess it was stealing," said Bob slowly. "Yes, I almost stole."

Kathy put down her cup and looked at him. She saw a Bob any girl could be proud to have imagined herself in love with. No self-pity masked his handsome face. She could tell he wasn't blaming anyone for his present confusion. Not his father, even though Mr. Lansford was far from blameless in Kathy's eyes.

Some kids blamed their parents for everything. Deirdre would when she was caught, as she surely would be someday. She would just shift over responsibility for her own actions by saying her parents hadn't loved her the way they should have. That was an easy way to feel better about yourself. But Bob, she could see, wasn't taking it. He sat quietly, his hands clasped before him on the table.

Finally he whispered, "Thief? Thief? I don't want to think of myself that way." He stared into space. "You know, Kath, I've got a lot of figuring out to do."

# 17

FINCH'S HAD SALE ADS IN THE MORNING PAPERS. WHEN KATHY arrived, customers were buzzing around outside, waiting for the doors to open.

Time would fly today. She hoped she would get a chance to drop a hint to Deirdre that Finch's knew someone had stolen an extra pad of saleschecks from the cashier's desk, that they were on guard against her trick. Mr. Braxton, Kathy realized now, had been dropping hints to Deirdre for months. Without the evidence he could not accuse. Kathy knew the genial man hoped that it would never be necessary. She hoped so too.

Her sister flatly disagreed. "Both of you are wrong. He particularly. Mr. Braxton, it seems to me, likes to be liked more than any boss should. Kathy, you find the evidence and call the store detective. If that girl keeps on she could become a hardened criminal." Then Jane's schoolteacher efficiency had dissolved. "I know, you don't want to tell on her. Really, though, in the long run it would be kindest."

Where did Deirdre keep that pad of saleschecks hidden? wondered Kathy as she dusted off the counter. In her purse?

In that *Dog World* magazine? Did she keep the magazine under her salesbook for that purpose? Kathy couldn't believe so. There was nothing dishonest about Deirdre's love for dogs. That magazine was for reading, avidly, and at every opportunity.

Deirdre clattered across the floor as the doors opened and customers poured in.

"Someone else can have your old boy friend," she said, slinging back her long beaded necklace as though it were ermine. "He never showed up for our date last night."

Then she rushed off to the stock room for a particularly irate customer who wondered out loud why Finch's paid its help to stand around and talk to each other all day.

Kathy waited on two customers at a time. Deirdre did the same. Mr. Braxton rushed from department to department, helping out where he could. The main floor hummed.

An Army private had been waiting his turn patiently, too patiently. Every time Kathy turned to him a more aggressive customer spoke first. She wrapped a china ash tray for one customer and a silver bread tray for another, then turned to him again. A buxom woman with a plumed hat pushed in front of him.

He smiled sleepily. "Go ahead, ma'am, I'm in no hurry." To Kathy he said, "Wanted to ask about that squatty little teapot you had in the window a while back."

"I'll be with you in a minute, sir," she promised. But half an hour went by and the soldier still politely stepped aside for everyone else.

Finally he gestured to Kathy. "I'll come back later, miss,

when you're not so busy. No hurry. My wife never expects her Christmas present until after Washington's Birthday anyway."

Alert, Kathy looked up. Wife's Christmas present? Squatty little teapot—the Aladdin's lamp teapot?

"Sir, sir," she cried, "are you the Mr. Weighlund who telephoned about a silver teapot at Christmastime?"

"Imagine your remembering," he drawled. "I'll be back." He saluted with two fingers and blended into the stream of people headed for the door.

"Mr. Weighlund!" she called, but he kept easing away.

Deirdre had been tugging at her sleeve. Now in an urgent tone, she said, "Kathy, will you please look?" She pointed out the window. "That puppy is lost. Ah, he's so frightened. I've got to get him before he's trampled or run over. Take this sale for me."

"No, wait." Kathy tried to grab Deirdre's arm, but the girl was leaping toward the door to rescue the pup. Kathy saw Mr. Braxton across the floor. She caught his attention and waved. He hurried over. After hearing about Mr. Weighlund's reappearance, he rushed her from behind the counter.

"Go after him. I'll take over here. Yes, Miss Parker, I know it's Miss Jones' sale. I'll write it up in her book. Now, hurry!"

Kathy pushed through the crowds, stretching to catch a glimpse of the missing Weighlund cousin. Oh, it must be he. He had Guy's sleepy-eyed good nature. At last she spotted him bent over the jewelry counter.

She rushed up and asked point blank, "Tell me, please, do you own property up in Vickers Circle?"

When he nodded, she poured out the whole complex story.

He nodded again. "Why, sure I'll sign that road release. Didn't know a thing about it. My wife and I were talking about visiting the Circle last summer. Then I remembered all that golden rod up there." He sniffed. "Have an allergy." He smiled complacently. "Runs in the family."

He gave her his address. "Your daddy won't have to build that road himself on my account. Don't you worry about it any more, miss. Don't worry about the teapot either. I'll get my wife this topaz bracelet for Christmas instead."

Bubbling with suppressed excitement, Kathy rushed back to silver and china. Neither Mr. Braxton nor Deirdre was there. Two girls from linens were behind the counter.

Clamoring customers claimed her attention. An hour went by like a minute. When Mr. Braxton came back on the floor, Kathy conveyed her news by making a victorious bull's-eye with her thumb and index finger and then went on selling. Two hours passed, and still Deirdre did not return.

After lunch Mr. Braxton called Kathy into his office, closed the door and motioned her to a chair. Deirdre's *Dog World* magazine was on his desk. A knowing sigh escaped Kathy.

Mr. Braxton tapped the magazine. "You seem to know what I found here, the pad of saleschecks we've been look-

ing for." He frowned. "Did you know what Miss Jones was up to?"

"Not until last night," said Kathy.

"Yes, I suppose that boy who returned the tray yesterday must have been a classmate of yours. He was thoroughly investigated. He lives here in Floral City. Did he tell you?"

When she nodded, Mr. Braxton said, "Why didn't you report this?" He seemed distressed by some sudden awareness. "Why, you might have been unjustly accused. Any of my girls might have been." He moved uncomfortably in his chair. "I should have reported my suspicions about Miss Jones long ago. I looked the other way until the evidence literally fell into my hands."

"When you wrote up that sale in Deirdre's book this morning?"

"Yes, why ever did she go off and leave such telltale evidence lying around?" His distaste for detective work was apparent.

Kathy told about the lost pup. "She wasn't thinking about anything except saving that puppy. She loves dogs."

"She saved the dog, but lost her job," said Mr. Braxton. "If it hadn't been for her parents' complete cooperation, Miss Jones could have lost a lot more—her freedom."

He leaned back in his chair and shook his head. "I don't wonder you seem surprised, Miss Parker. I know how the girl spoke of her family. Her first serious mistake was in thinking they didn't love her, didn't care about her as an individual. After our security department called, they came right over, settled with Finch's and took their daughter

home, dogs and all. Miss Jones, I'm sorry to say, didn't act very appreciative. Well, at any rate, she has a second chance. I hope she takes it. Third chances are rare." He stood up. "I thought you had a right to know what had happened to your former coworker. I knew you would be wondering."

Back at the counter Kathy wondered about something else. She hadn't liked Deirdre much and she had done wrong, of course. Still, it seemed unfair that her honest love for dogs had baited and snapped the trap. Concern for a lost pup had told on Deirdre Jones. A fine reward! Then she recalled her sister's view, that telling would be kindest in the long run.

A letter from Michael was on the mantel. She took it into her bedroom to read. When she ripped it open her fingers trembled. She read on and on: about his train trip, about camp and his barrack buddies. Not until the last paragraph did she find what she had been hoping for.

*That day in the railway station, I wanted to keep looking at you all the time. Not because you're pretty. You are. I always knew that. This was different. All the way up in the train I kept thinking how everything had become more important since I met you. More interesting. You know, deeper, as though I had two pair of eyes to see through instead of only one. (See what I mean? I get weird ideas too now, like you.) I began thinking about the next time I'd see you. Then I knew. Here it is—I'm saying it right out and not feeling very calm—this is—*

An inch below he had printed in big capital letters, LOVE and then scrawled *Michael*

She folded his letter carefully and put it in the zippered section of her purse. Later, after she telephoned Dad and Mums about the road release, she would read it again—and again. Would her voice reveal her precious secret? She went to the mirror. Did it show, this singing, soaring feeling she had?

Three and a half weeks later Kathy had five letters from Michael in her purse. They went with her everywhere—to church, to work, to Community College every Tuesday and Thursday evening. Usually she arrived early and read his latest letter over again while waiting for class to start. Tonight she had no time to spare. She sat down, just before the last student straggled in.

The professor closed the door and walked to the front of the room. He smiled at them and rubbed his hands together. The class recognized this preliminary to an exam announcement. Groans came from various points in the room. The professor laughed out loud and asked, "Who can tell, in the scientific terms of psychology, what has just happened?"

A young man spoke up. "You've conditioned us to expect an exam announcement when you rub your hands and smile—smile that funny way."

The professor nodded with satisfaction. "Then all I need tell you is the date. Your midterm will be one week from tonight, March 17."

Kathy wrote the date down, quickly deciding she must pack her text and notebook when she went home next week end. There was no other way. The Circle celebration was

March 14. She couldn't miss that. Mums insisted she mustn't.

"Without your help, oh, without a lot of people, but you especially, kitten, there wouldn't have been much to celebrate," she had said over the telephone.

Though unfinished the new highway was passable. It was being officially opened, as was Hank's cave and Aunt Emily's miniature museum. So many Kathy wanted to see would be at the reception in the shale-brick factory—Celeste, the doctor, the Weighlunds. Lucy was driving down from Upstate with Miss Sands.

Lucy was curious about this psychology course. *It sounds more personal than math or English* [she had written]. *It sounds as though you hear and talk about yourselves a lot, and for goodness' sake, what could be more interesting?*

Lucy would want to see her notebook. The professor had shown slides of several experiments with rats, cats, and monkeys, proving some former theories about growth and behavior, disproving others. Kathy had written it all down. He had led them through ink-blot tests, methods of study, and statistics. Everyone in class made careful notations. They took seriously too the professor's contention that life was one glorious question after another. They asked dozens. Every question received careful consideration, though they were often warned that not all could be answered by him or anyone else at the present time.

"Your generation has much to do," he often said.

Kathy looked up. The professor was speaking. "Now we come to a topic of personal interest to most of you. At your

stage of growth two matters concern you vitally, choice of a career and the expansion of love from your family to a future life partner."

A student raised her hand. "Just what is love, professor?"

Kathy glanced at the girl. She was very young. She had stars in her eyes. She reminded Kathy of someone, she couldn't bother to think who at the moment. Remembering how she and Lucy had pondered over love during their senior year, Kathy was listening attentively.

However, the professor, after a thoughtful moment, simply said, "I can't answer that."

Two evenings later this same girl caught up with Kathy in the hall after class. "I detest March," she said, wrinkling her nose. "It's so in-between. I don't think I'd worry half as much about that midterm next week any other time of the year. I'm jittery. I'm going to study all week end."

"So am I," admitted Kathy. "I'm taking my books along when I go home to Circle's End this week end."

"Circle's End?" shrieked the girl. "What an odd name. Self-contradictory, I guess you'd call it. Because circles don't end, do they?"

Kathy smiled. Now she knew of whom the girl reminded her. So much had happened since she had made that same observation almost a year ago. She still agreed with her younger self. Circles didn't end. They went round and round like the seasons.

Dreary March again, and here was she fretting over an exam again. Dreaming the same last year's dream of Upstate's hilltop buildings and sloping lawns.

Then she recalled the one purple crocus she had seen on her way to work this morning. Spring would soon be here again too. Up home the thawed creek would be rushing free. Bold sprouts would force life through the crusted earth. Every acre of Circle's End would pulsate with an impatience to begin anew.

Another spring. The same and yet like no other. This spring's dreams of college, like her thoughts about Michael Dunlop, would be based on strong reality.

Clearly Kathy could see herself scurrying across the campus next September. She wouldn't scurry as fast as she would have last year, or giggle as much. Probably she wouldn't giggle at all. She found she couldn't regret that, any more than she could regret this past year. It had been full of aches and bitter disappointments, yet full of new joys, new people and ideas too. Perhaps that was all you should ever ask, that your days and years be full. She remembered reading that somewhere.

So clearly she could visualize Michael when next they met, Michael just as he was. Their love would grow. It was real. How Kathy knew this she could not explain. Along with her starry-eyed evening classmate and herself of a year ago, she still wondered—what is love? She would keep asking, keep wondering, even though she was beginning to suspect that love would always remain life's most glorious question.

*(Continued from front flap)*

Why does Aunt Emily refuse to speak to her grandson's widow, the silent, pretty Celeste who has taken a job at Father's factory; and why her strange withdrawal from people?

Before the summer is over Kathy has cleared up a number of old misunderstandings, for herself as well as others. Bob Lansford's visits have been less than satisfactory. Can it be that she has only been in love with love? Now she has met Michael, with whom she feels happy and relaxed.

In this summer of growing up Kathy has found that love has many dimensions —courage, devotion and loyalty. The discovery leads her to a decision which makes her family proud, and extends a little longer for herself the bittersweet flavor of her seventeenth year.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Norma Wood James grew up in Brooklyn and attended Pace College. After combining a job and night school for a number of years, she married Edward H. James, a design engineer. They are the parents of two sons and a daughter and now live in Freeport, Long Island. Mrs. James is the author of two previous books, both dealing with American history: *Dawn at Lexington* and *Young Doctor of New Amsterdam.* Bittersweet Year is her first novel with a present-day setting.

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